

# Hindu mythology

**Hindu mythology** refers to the collection of myths<sup>[a]</sup> associated with Hinduism, derived from various Hindu texts and traditions. These myths are found in sacred texts such as the Vedas,<sup>[1]</sup> the Itihasas (the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*),<sup>[2]</sup> and the Puranas.<sup>[3]</sup> They also appear in regional and ethnolinguistic texts, including the Bengali *Mangal Kavya* and the Tamil *Periya Puranam* and *Divya Prabandham*. Additionally, Hindu myths are also found in widely translated fables like the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesha*, as well as in Southeast Asian texts influenced by Hindu traditions.<sup>[4][5]</sup>



The Trimurti (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva) seated on lotuses with their consorts, the Tridevi (Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati).

## Meaning of "myth"

**Myth** is a genre of folklore or theology consisting primarily of narratives that play a fundamental role in a society, such as foundational tales or origin myths. For folklorists, historians, philosophers or theologians this is very different from the use of "myth" simply indicating that something is not true. Instead, the truth value of a myth is not a defining criterion.<sup>[6]</sup> Hindus see this as not just tales, but their history and tradition passed on in literary form.

Hindu myths can be found in the Vedas, the itihasa (Ramayana and Mahabharata), and the major Puranas. Other sources include the Bengali literature, such as Mangal-Kāvya, and the Tamil literature, such as Divya Prabandham, Tirumurai and the Five Great Epics. These narratives play a crucial role in the Hindu tradition and are considered real and significant within their cultural and spiritual context, offering profound insights into the beliefs and values of Hinduism.



Krishna elopes with Princess Rukmini

# Origins and development

## Indus Valley Civilisation

According to Joseph Campbell, the Indus Valley (2600–1900 BCE) may have left traces in the beliefs and traditions of Hinduism. Artefacts have revealed motifs that are also employed and revered by Hindus today, such as primary male deities worshipped by a ruling elite, mother goddesses, nature spirits, snake worship, as well as the reverence of other theriomorphic (animal-shaped) beings.<sup>[7]</sup> These themes would be maintained by the Dravidian folk religion even after the decline of its parent civilisation around 1800 BCE.<sup>[8]</sup>



Shiva slays Gajasura

## Vedic Period

A major factor in the development of Hinduism was the Vedic religion. The Indo-Aryan migration brought their distinct beliefs to the Indian subcontinent, where the Vedas were composed around 1500 BCE. The Indo-Aryans Vedic pantheon of deities included the chief god Indra, the sun deity Surya, Ushas, as well as Agni.<sup>[9][10]</sup>



Vishnu's Matsya avatar, a prominent Hindu myth.

## Brahmanical Period

This period saw the composition of commentaries referred to as the Brahmanas.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Upanishad Period

According to Williams, from 900 to 600 BCE, the protests of the populace against sacrifices made towards the Vedic gods and rebellions against the Brahmin class led to the embrace of reform by the latter and the composition of the fourth Veda and the Vedanta texts. About half of the Upanishads were mystical and unitive, speaking of experiencing the divine as the one (ekam), while the other half promoted devotion to one or more deities. New gods and goddesses were celebrated, and devotional practices began to be introduced.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Sramanic movements

Elements such as those emerging from Buddhism and Jainism made their "heteroprax" contributions to later Hindu mythology, such as temples, indoor shrines, and rituals modeled after service to a divine king. Renunciate traditions contributed elements that questioned sacrifices and the killing of animals, and promoted asceticism and vegetarianism. All of these themes would be incorporated by

the Brahmin classes into the later Hindu synthesis, which developed in response to the sramanic movements between ca. 500–300 BCE and 500 CE, and also found their way into Hindu mythology.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Epic Period

The era from 400 BCE to 400 CE was the period of the compilation of India's great epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana. These were central manifestations of the newly developing Hindu synthesis, contributing to a specific Hindu mythology, emphasising divine action on earth in Vishnu's incarnations and other divine manifestations. The lore of the devas and the asuras expanded. Epic mythology foreshadowed the rich polytheism of the next two periods. The Mahabharata contained two appendices that were extremely important sources for later mythological development, the Bhagavad Gita and the Harivamsa.

## Puranic Period

According to Williams, the mythology of the Puranas can be broken into three periods (300–500; 500–1000; 1000–1800), or the whole period may simply be referred to as the Hindu Middle Ages. This age saw the composition of the major Puranic texts of the faith, along with the rise of sectarianism, with followers amassing around the cults of Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi. The three denominations within this period help locate in time historical developments within the sectarian communities, the rise and decline of Tantrism and its influence on mainstream mythology, the tendencies in Puranic mythologising of subordinating Vedic gods and past heroes to ever-increasing moral weaknesses, going on to be identified as a period of exuberant polytheism. However, this was also accompanied with the belief in monotheism, the idea that all paths lead to the Ultimate Reality, Brahman.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Tantric Period

According to Williams, during the Tantric period from 900 to 1600 CE, the mythology of Tantra and Shaktism revived and enriched blood sacrifice and the pursuit of pleasure as central themes. Tantra's stories differed radically in meaning from those of epic mythology, which favored devotion, asceticism, and duty. There was either a revival or emphasis that was placed on the shakti or the cosmic energy of goddesses, a concept that had emerged during the Indus Valley Civilisation.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Modern Period

In the contemporary era, the mythologies of the dominant traditions of Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism prevail.<sup>[13]</sup> Several myths were found or invented to make tribals or former "outcastes" Hindus and bring them within the cultural whole of a reconstructed Hindu mythological community.

# Mythical themes and types

Academic studies of mythology often define mythology as deeply valued stories that explain a society's existence and world order: those narratives of a society's creation, the society's origins and foundations, their god(s), their original heroes, mankind's connection to the "divine", and their narratives of eschatology (what happens in the "after-life"). This is a very general outline of some of the basic sacred stories with those themes. In its broadest academic sense, the word *myth* simply means a traditional story. However, many scholars restrict the term "myth" to sacred stories.<sup>[14]</sup> Folklorists often go further, defining myths as "tales believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters".<sup>[15]</sup>



Depictions of episodes from Hindu mythology

In classical Greek, *muthos*, from which the English word *myth* derives, meant "story, narrative." Hindu mythology does not often have a consistent, monolithic structure. The same myth typically appears in various versions, and can be represented differently across different regional and socio-religious traditions.<sup>[16]</sup> Many of these legends evolve across these texts, where the character names change or the story is embellished with greater details.<sup>[16][17]</sup> According to Suthren Hirst, these myths have been given a complex range of interpretations.<sup>[16]</sup> While according to Doniger O'Flaherty, the central message and moral values remain the same.<sup>[17]</sup> They have been modified by various philosophical schools over time, and are taken to have deeper, often symbolic, meaning.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Cosmology

- Brahman The Ultimate Reality in Hinduism
- Satyaloka The abode of Brahma
- Hiranyagarbha The golden egg from which creation emerges
- Vaikuntha The abode of Vishnu
- Goloka The abode of Radha Krishna
- Kailasa The abode of Shiva
- Bhumi The Hindu name for Earth.
- Patala The netherworld
- Svarga The Hindu concept of "heaven", but not strictly related to afterlife, but more like "utopia" in real world.
- Naraka The Hindu concept of "hell", but not a site of permanent damnation

## Deities

### Pantheism

- Brahman The Ultimate Reality

## **Vaishnavism** (Vishnu-centric)

- Vishnu The God of Preservation
- Lakshmi The Goddess of Prosperity
- Dashavatara Ten incarnations of Vishnu, chiefly Krishna and Rama

## **Shaivism** (Shiva-centric)

- Shiva The God of Destruction
- Parvati The Goddess of Power
- Ganesha The God of Auspiciousness
- Kartikeya The God of Victory and War

## **Shaktism** (Goddess-centric)

- Mahadevi Supreme Goddess
- Saraswati Goddess of Wisdom
- Lakshmi Goddess of Prosperity
- Parvati Goddess of Power
- Durga Goddess of War
- Kali Goddess of time and destruction

## **Henotheism and Polytheism**

- Brahma The God of Creation
- Vishnu The God of Preservation
- Shiva The God of Destruction
- Indra The King of the Devas and Svarga
- Saraswati The Goddess of Wisdom
- Lakshmi The Goddess of Prosperity
- Parvati The Goddess of Power
- Ganesha The God of Auspiciousness
- Krishna The God of love and protection
- Radha The goddess of love, chief consort of Krishna
- Rukmini The first queen consort and principal wife of Krishna<sup>[18]</sup>
- Satyabhama The third queen consort of Krishna
- Yamuna one of the main sacred river goddesses in Hinduism and the fourth queen consort of Krishna
- Bhudevi Goddess of the Earth
- Kartikeya (Murugan) God of Victory and War
- Rama The seventh incarnation of Vishnu
- Kali A terrible aspect of Parvati
- Durga A principal aspect of Mahadevi
- Ashvins Twin gods of medicine
- Agni God of Fire
- Rudra God of the storm
- Shakti Personification of power



- [Vayu](#) God of the wind
- [Surya](#) God of the Sun
- [Varuna](#) God of the oceans
- [Lakshmana](#) Younger Brother of Rama
- [Hanuman](#) Highest devotee of Rama
- [Sita](#) Consort of Rama and incarnation of Lakshmi
- [Sati](#) An incarnation of the goddess [Shakti](#)
- [Kubera](#) God of Wealth
- [Parshurama](#) The sixth incarnation of [Vishnu](#)
- [Yama](#) God of Death and the Underworld
- [Chandra](#) God of the Moon
- [Balarama](#) incarnation of [Shesha](#) and in some traditions an avatar of Vishnu
- [Prajapati](#) Creator deity
- [Kalki](#) Prophesied final incarnation of Vishnu
- [Dashavatara](#) (Ten Incarnations of [Vishnu](#))
- [Narada](#) Divine sage, messenger of gods
- [Sundaravalli](#) Daughter of Vishnu, consort of Murugan
- [Devasena](#) Daughter of Vishnu, consort of Murugan
- [Kamadeva](#) The God of love and desire
- [Rati](#) The Goddess of love and desire
- [Shani](#) Divine Personification of the planet saturn

*[Dravidian folk religion](#)* (Indigenous Dravidian faith)

- [Mariamman](#) Mother goddess
- [Ayyanar](#) Guardian deity
- [Ayyappan](#) God of Dharma

## Connections to other belief systems

[Hinduism](#) shares [mythemes](#) with [Buddhism](#), [Jainism](#), and [Sikhism](#).

## See also

- [Dashavatara](#)
- [Greek mythology](#)
- [Hindu cosmology](#)
- [Hindu deities](#)
- [Hindu eschatology](#)
- [Hindu scriptures](#)
- [Meitei mythology](#)
- [Proto-Indo-European religion](#)
- [Proto-Indo-Iranian religion](#)
- [Puranic chronology](#)
- [Saga](#)



- [Vedic mythology](#)
- [Myth=Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology](#)

## Notes

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- a. The term *myth* is used here in its academic sense, meaning "a traditional story consisting of events that are ostensibly historical, though often supernatural, explaining the origins of a cultural practice or natural phenomenon". It is *not* being used to mean "something that is false".

## Citations

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1. [Macdonell 1978](#), p. 1–9.
2. [Washburn Hopkins 1986](#), pp. 1–3.
3. [Bonnefoy 1993](#), p. 90–101.
4. [Olivelle 1999](#), p. xii–xiii.
5. [Waldau & Patton 2009](#), p. 186, 680.
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7. Opler, Morris E.; Campbell, Joseph (January 1962). "The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology". *The Journal of American Folklore*. **75** (295): 82. doi:10.2307/537862 (<https://doi.org/10.2307%2F537862>). ISSN 0021-8715 (<https://search.worldcat.org/issn/0021-8715>). JSTOR 537862 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/537862>).
8. "Decline of the Indus River Valley Civilization (c. 3300–1300 BCE)" (<https://www.science.smith.edu/climatelit/decline-of-the-indus-river-valley-civilization-c-3300-1300-bce/>). *Climate in Arts and History*. Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20220731074042/https://www.science.smith.edu/climatelit/decline-of-the-indus-river-valley-civilization-c-3300-1300-bce/>) from the original on 31 July 2022. Retrieved 31 July 2022.
9. [Williams 2003](#), pp. 6–7.
10. [Macdonell, Arthur Anthony \(1974\)](#). *Vedic mythology* (Reprint, 1995 ed.). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. ISBN 0-8426-0674-2. OCLC 1951729 (<https://search.worldcat.org/oclc/1951729>).
11. [Williams 2003](#), p. 7.
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16. [Suthren Hirst 1998](#).
17. [Doniger O'Flaherty 1975](#), p. 11, 21–22.

18. Vemsani, Lavanya (13 June 2016). *Krishna in History, Thought, and Culture: An Encyclopedia of the Hindu Lord of Many Names: An Encyclopedia of the Hindu Lord of Many Names* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=4fw2DAAAQBAJ&pg=PA91>). ABC-CLIO. p. 91. ISBN 978-1-61069-211-3. Archived (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230326164823/https://books.google.com/books?id=4fw2DAAAQBAJ&pg=PA91>) from the original on 26 March 2023. Retrieved 2 March 2023.

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## Further reading

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## External links

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- Clay Sanskrit Library (<http://www.claysanskritlibrary.org>) publishes classical Indian literature, including the Mahabharata and Ramayana, with facing-page text and translation. Also offers searchable corpus and downloadable materials.
  - Sanskrit Documents Collection (<http://sanskritdocuments.org>): Documents in ITX format of Upanishads, Stotras etc.
  - Hindu Mythology Stories from Ancient India ([https://www.kidsgen.com/fables\\_and\\_fairytales/indian\\_mythology\\_stories/](https://www.kidsgen.com/fables_and_fairytales/indian_mythology_stories/))
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