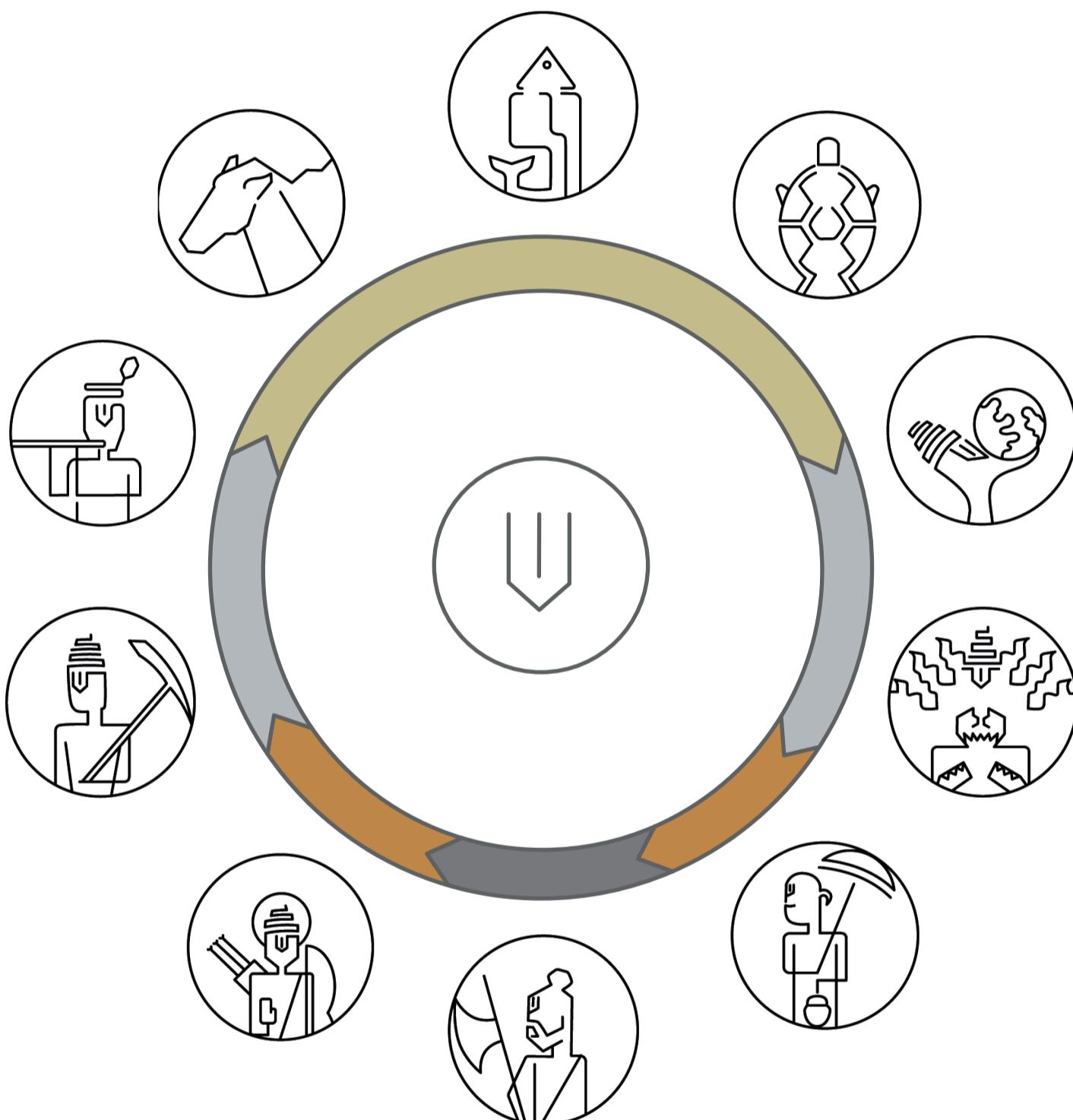


# Semiosis And Iconography of Dasavatara

The Ten Incarnations Of Vishnu In Hindu Mythology



# Dasavatara

## The Ten Incarnations of Vishnu in Hindu Mythology

### The Role of Legends

Hindu mythology is rich with legends of Gods, Goddesses, Demons and Heroes. Legend, typically, is a short episodic, traditional, highly ecotyped historicized narrative. It is performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level, a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences. It serves as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs. These stories have been passed down from generation to generation and immortalised through paintings and sculptures. The aim of these legends may have been to set up guidelines for behavior in society based on the morals in these tales. Sins such as greed, pride and lust are punished by divine retribution. Legends are an engaging and entertaining form through which behavior can be controlled, by playing on their primal fear of Nature and Gods.

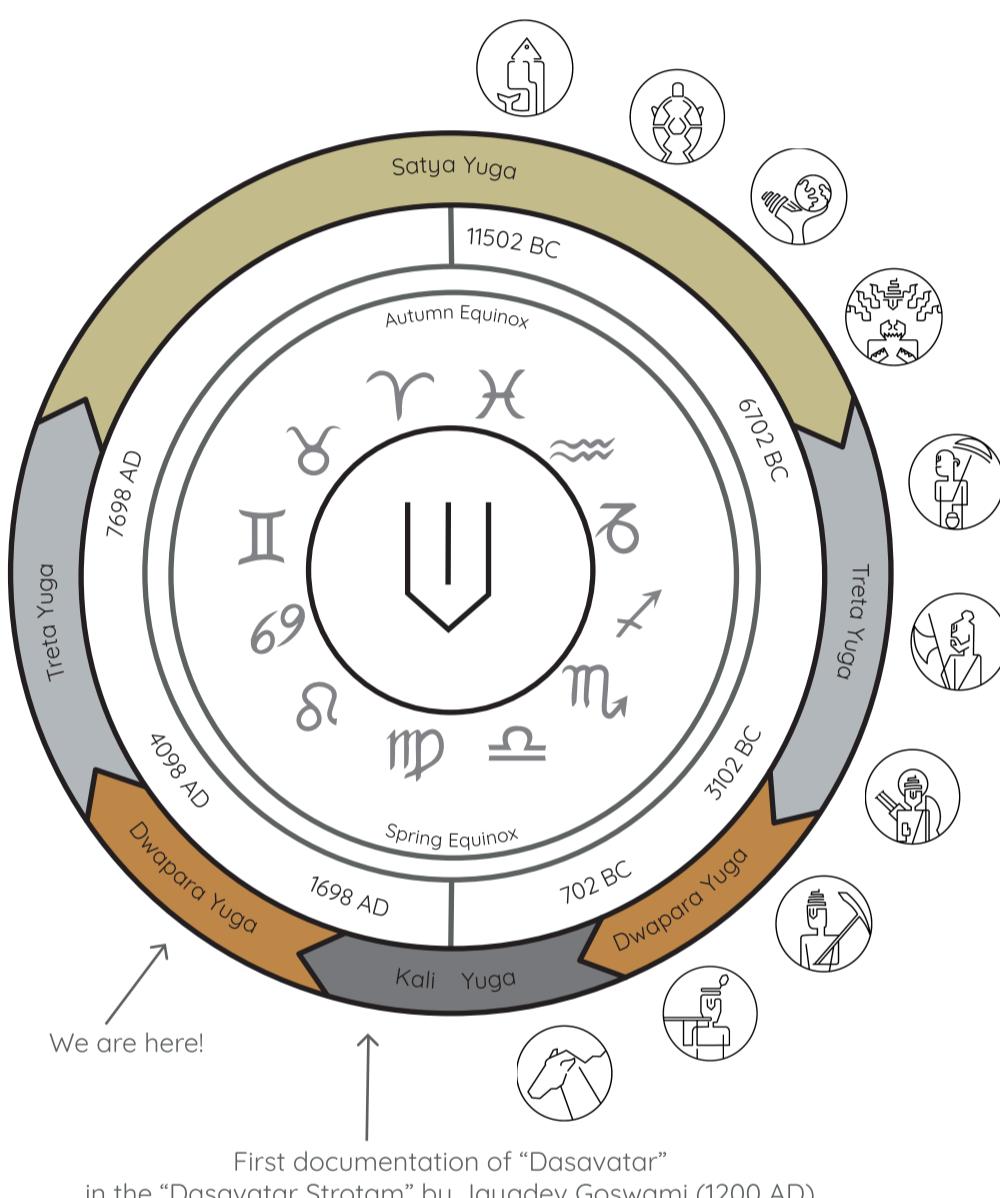
The history of the world is divided into 4 Yugas or Periods that occur in a cyclical manner. A whole cycle consists of two golden ages, two silver ages, two bronze ages, and two iron ages. This is based on the lunar cycle and is correlated to the zodiac signs.

The Yugas are symbolic of the phases of a man's life and are in the ratio of 4:3:2:1. Each avatar is characteristic of a certain Yuga. The first two Yugas (4+3) could correspond to the 7 days of creation in the Bible as well.

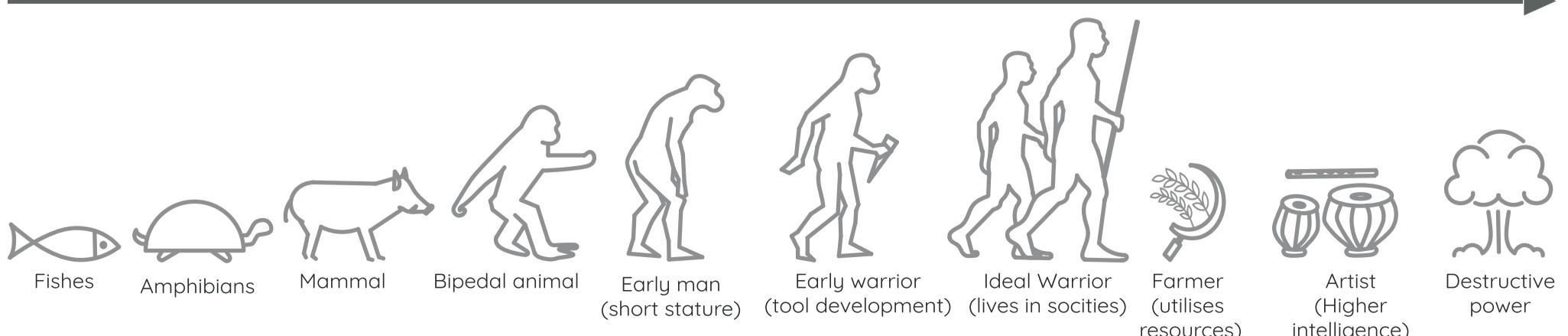
- Satya Yuga  
symbolic of childhood.  
Period of 4800 years
- Treta Yuga  
symbolic of youth.  
Period of 3600 years
- Dwapara Yuga  
symbolic of maturity.  
Period of 2400 years
- Kali Yuga  
symbolic of old age.  
Period of 1200 years

### The Dasavatara

Lord Vishnu is the protector of the universe and the preserver of cosmic balance. He is also known as Narayana, Jagannath, Vasudeva, Vithoba, and Hari. Whenever his disciples are in distress or the Gods are in trouble, he incarnates on earth to set things right. The concept of Gods taking various incarnations is prevalent in several cultures eg. Zeus takes on the form of a swan and a bull. Each form taken up by Vishnu has roots in the society and lifestyle of the people at that time. The tales themselves act as cautionary stories for humans to guard against amoral behavior. Some of these tales have similar themes to those in other cultures as well.



### Comparison of Dasavatara with Darwin's Theory of Evolution



# Matsya Avatar

## protector of the vedas

High forehead signifies a larger brain which transforms us from animal to human.

The Chakra symbolizes Vishnu's power and strength to defeat enemies.

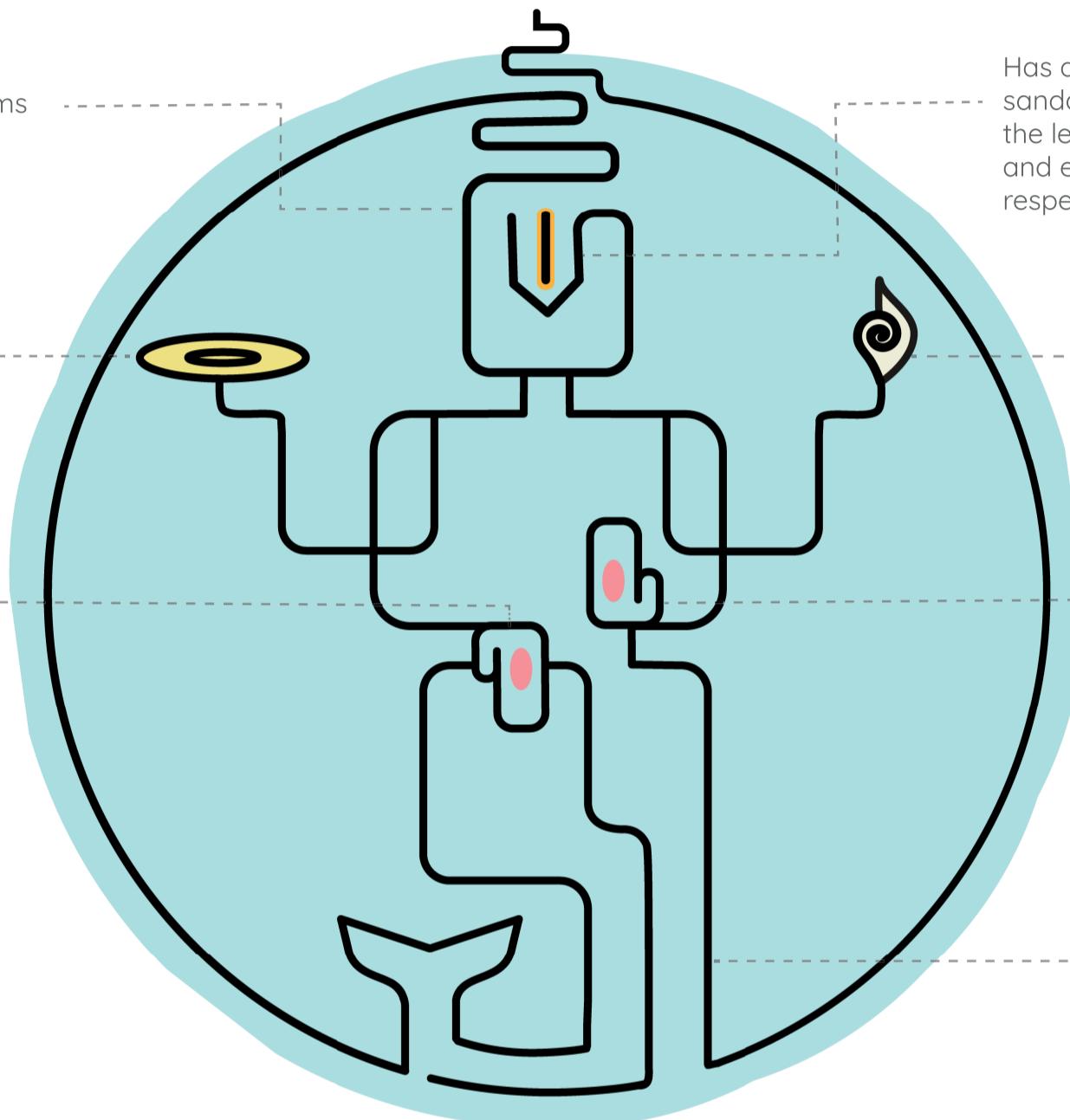
Downward pointing palm addresses fear of scarcity. It fulfills the needs of mankind.

Has a sacred mark made with sandalwood paste. The right and the left lines signify intellectual and emotional growth respectively.

The conch shell symbolizes the spiral path available to humans if they break free from the fetters of nature.

Upward pointing palm addresses the fear of predators; one should not be afraid.

Lower half as fish body reminiscent of animal instincts.



### The Story

The demon Hayagriva steals the Vedas from Brahma's mouth and hides them in the ocean within a conch shell. Brahma then requests Vishnu for help in retrieving them. Vishnu takes on the form of a gigantic fish and dives into the ocean. He battles Hayagriva, defeats him and releases the Vedas. After having killed the demon, Vishnu turns the conch shell in which the demon had hidden into a trumpet called Panchajanya. He then blows the conch so that everyone hears the secret of the Vedas.

Another tale is that of Manu, the first man. He saves this small fish who is the incarnation of Vishnu from a predator. He protects it until it grows gigantic in size. The fish repays him by warning him of a terrible flood. Manu constructs a houseboat and the fish pulls the boat away to safety.

### Why the Fish ?

The stories of the avatar originated in coastal regions where people depended on marine life for survival. Matsya is believed to symbolize aquatic life as the first beings on earth.

### Morals

- Knowledge is for all
- Loyalty pays
- Protect the weak
- Greed is a sin

### Attributes

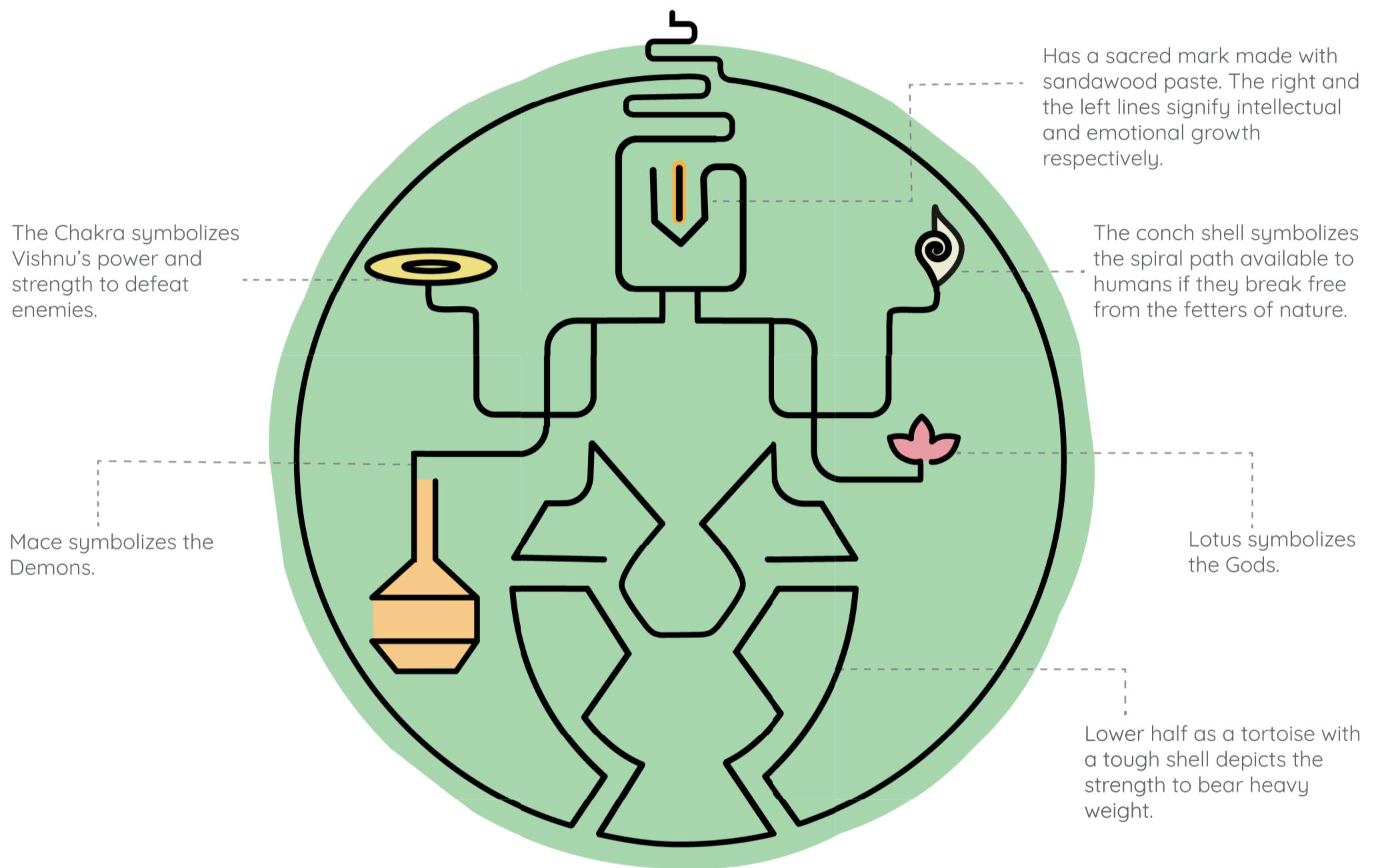
- Loyalty
- Co-operation
- One with Nature
- Strength

### Locations of temples



# Kurma Avatar

## saviour of mother earth



### The Story

During the constant battle between the Devas and Asuras, once the gods lost all their strength as they had been cursed by the short-tempered sage Durvasha. The Devas approached Vishnu for help. He asked them to churn the ocean of milk using Mt. Mandara as a churning stick and the serpent Vasuki as the rope with the help of the Asuras to get Amrit, the nectar of immortality in return for a share of it. As it was proceeding, the mountain kept sinking, so Vishnu took the form of the tortoise and kept the mountain afloat. As soon as the nectar of immortality was out, the Asuras grabbed it. Then Lord Vishnu took the form of a beautiful celestial maiden, and seduced the asuras into letting her distribute the nectar and also to abide by her order of distribution. As soon as the Devas were served, the maiden disappeared thus deceiving the Asuras.

### Why the Tortoise?

Kurma in the Vedic texts is a symbolic cosmogonic myth. He symbolizes the need for foundational principles and support for any sustained creative activity. Kurma's shape reflects the presumed hemispherical shape of the earth and this makes it part of the fire altar design.

### Morals

- Balance between Good and Evil
- Merits of co-operation
- Envy is a sin

### Attributes

- Intelligence
- Co-operation
- One with Nature
- Strength

### Locations of temples:



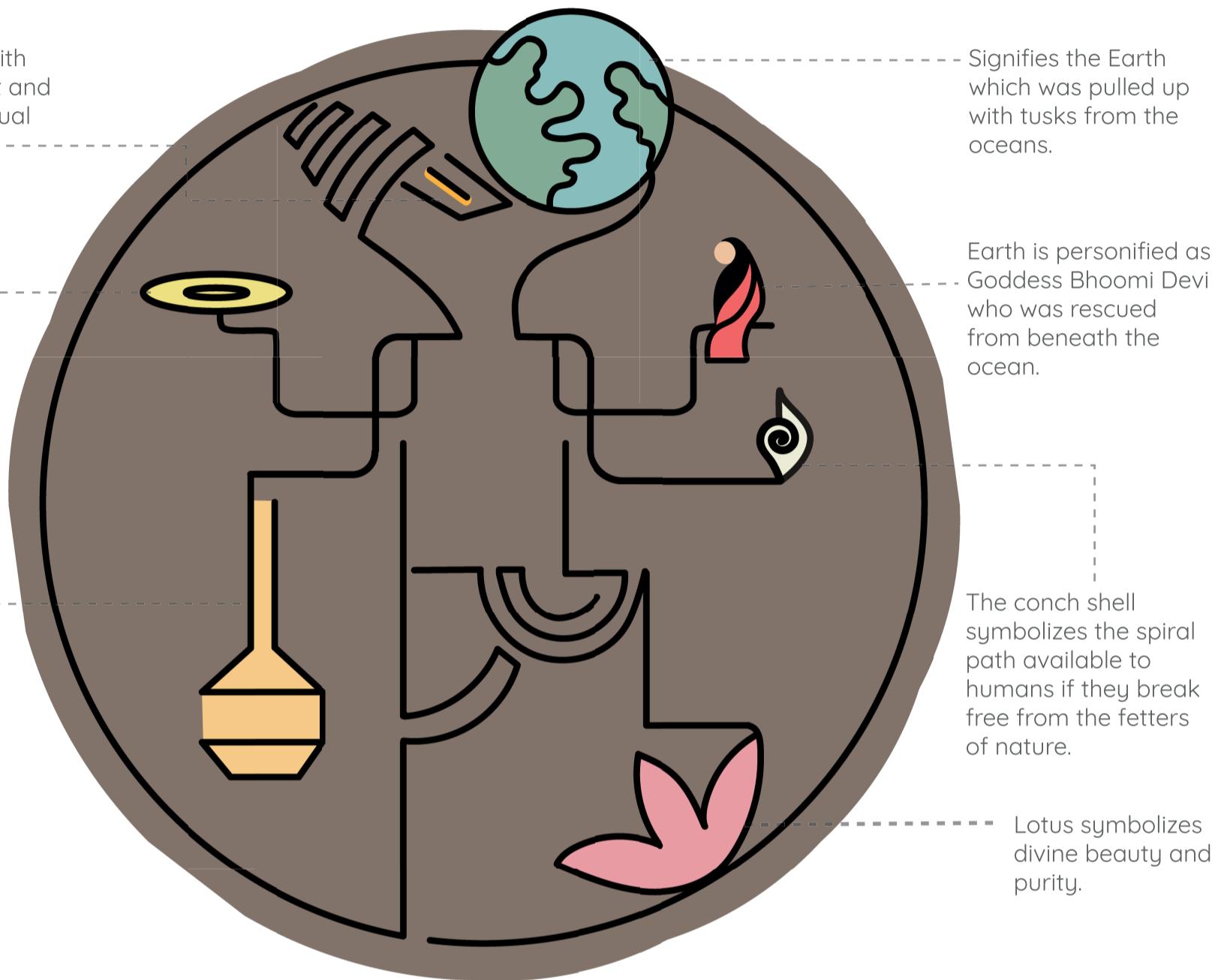
# Varaha Avatar

## savior of mother earth

Has a sacred mark made with sandalwood paste. The right and the left lines signify intellectual and emotional growth respectively.

The Chakra symbolizes Vishnu's power and strength to defeat enemies.

Mace symbolizes physical strength



Signifies the Earth which was pulled up with tusks from the oceans.

Earth is personified as Goddess Bhoomi Devi who was rescued from beneath the ocean.

The conch shell symbolizes the spiral path available to humans if they break free from the fetters of nature.

Lotus symbolizes divine beauty and purity.

### The Story

When the demon Hiranyaksha tormented the Earth (personified as the goddess Bhoo Devi) and its inhabitants, she sank into the primordial waters to escape him. Vishnu then takes the form of the "Varaha" or boar and descends into the depths of the ocean to rescue her. Varaha slays the demon and retrieves the Earth from beneath the ocean, lifting her on his trunk and restores her to her place in the universe. Bhoo Devi later takes Varaha as her consort.

### Why the Boar ?

Boars were much admired by hunters in India for their speed, strength, and stubborn bravery. Being a Boar, Vishnu is able to track the scent of the goddess and then burrow into the ocean to retrieve her. The Boar is also symbolic of force and power which can defeat greed.

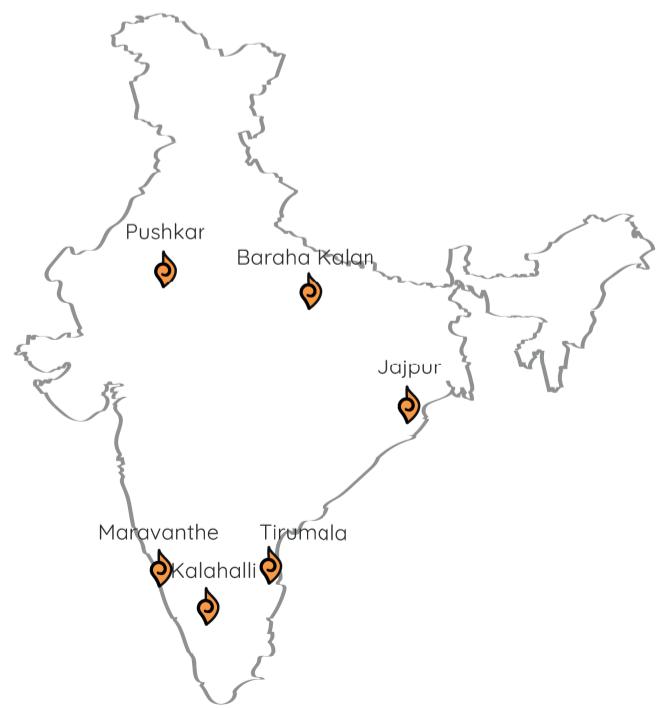
### Morals

- Power cannot be abused
- Earth belongs to all
- Greed is a sin

### Attributes

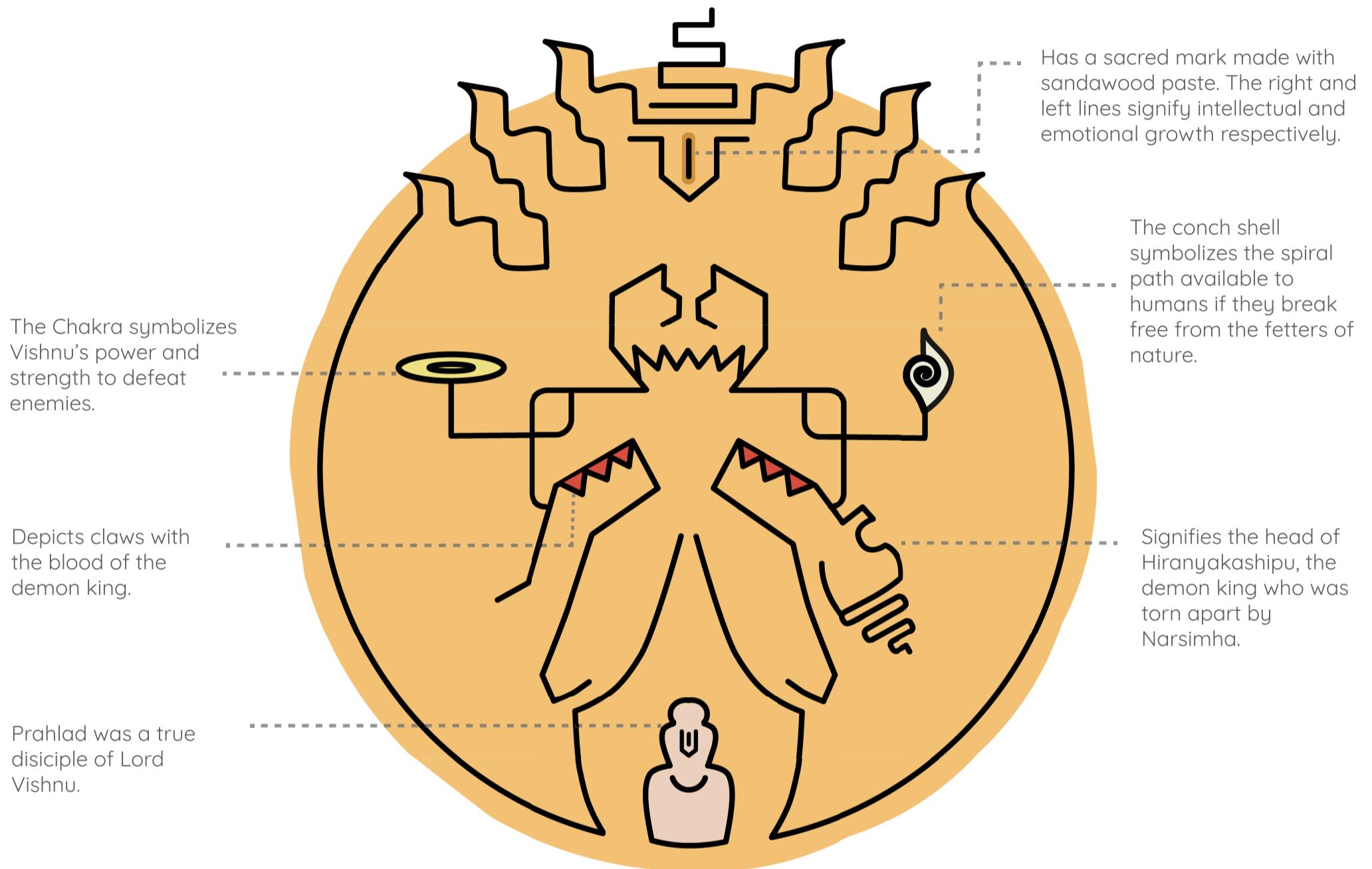
- Strength
- Loyalty
- One with Nature
- Anger

### Locations of temples:



# Narasimha Avatar

## destroyer of the wicked



### The Story

A demon king named Hiranyakashipu had been granted a boon by Brahma that kept him safe such that he could not be killed by a human, animal or deva, during the day or night, or inside or outside of his palace. Hiranyakashipu was not happy as his son Prahlad worshipped Vishnu and wanted to burn him to death. Vishnu became Narasimha, a half-man, half-lion creature (neither man nor human) and killed Hiranyakashipu during twilight (neither day, nor night) and on the threshold of the palace (neither inside, nor outside), without disrupting the boon.

### Why the Lion?

Narasimha is a significant iconic symbol of creative resistance, hope against odds, victory over persecution, and destruction of evil. The imagery of a lion is used, as it symbolizes strength, power and rage. The fact that Narasimha is half lion and half human symbolises how animals first began to walk on two legs and develop into humans.

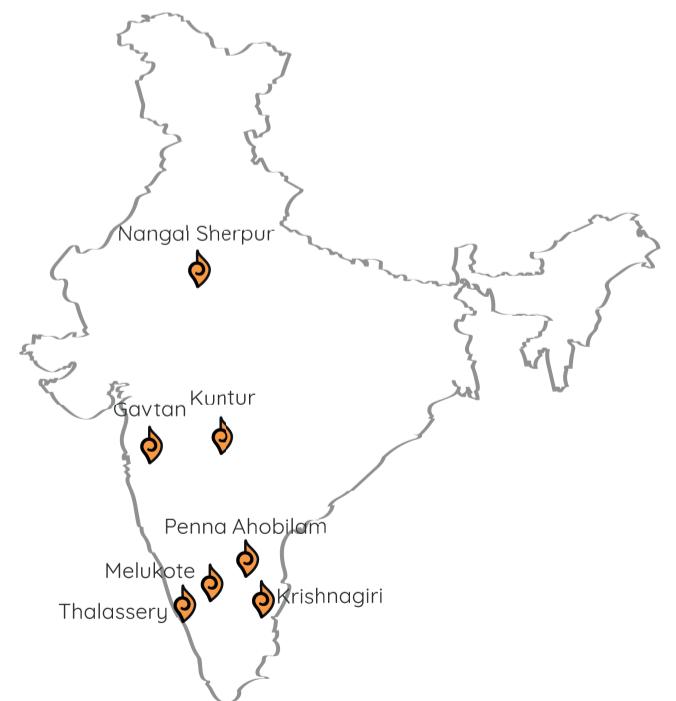
### Morals

- Worshippers of Vishnu are protected
- No one can escape death
- Pride is a sin

### Attributes

- Intelligence
- Anger
- One with Nature
- Strength

### Locations of temples



# Vamana Avatar

## small steps big consequences

Has a sacred mark made with sandalwood paste. The right and left lines signify intellectual and emotional growth respectively.

Umbrella to save him from the scorching heat.

The king Bali, the one who offered his head to Vamana the Brahmin to keep his third foot.

Kamandalu is an oblong water pot made of dry coconut shells in which Brahmins used to carry drinking water.

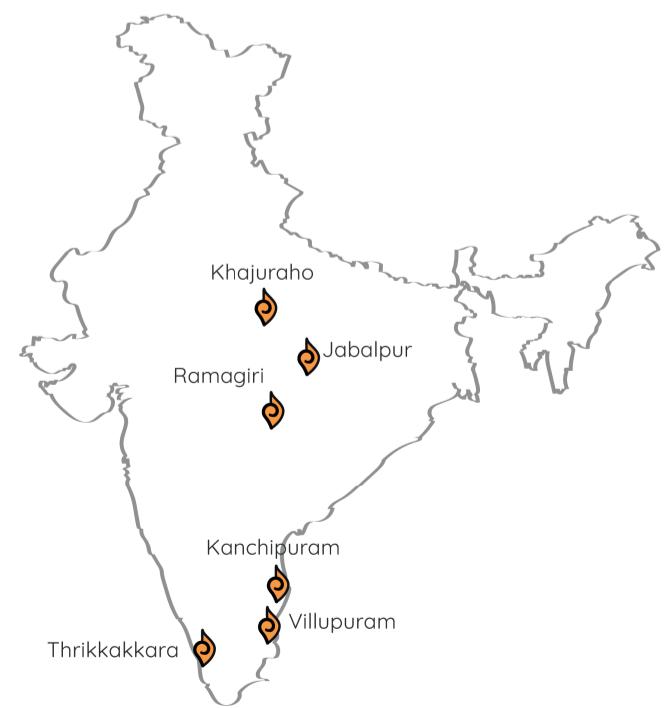
Depicts the heaven above the skies where the Vamana avatar kept his second leg.

Vamana kept his first foot on the Earth.

### Morals

- No one can control everything
- Overt self confidence can be fatal
- Pride is a sin
- Do not underestimate the smaller

### Locations of temples:



### Attributes

- Intelligence
- Mischief

### The Story

The Asura king Mahabali, who had acquired disproportionate power over the universe sponsors a sacrifice and gift giving ceremony to consolidate his power. At the request if the Gods who feel threatened, Vishnu appears at this ceremony as a dwarf mendicant Brahmin called Vamana. When Vamana's turn comes to receive a gift, Mahabali offers him whatever riches and material wealth he would like, but Vamana refuses everything and states he would just like three paces of land. Mahabali finds the dwarf's request amusingly small and irrevocably grants it. Vamana then grows into a giant of cosmic proportions. In one step he covers the earth, in another the heavens, and for the third, Mahabali offers his head on which Vamana steps, sending the demon king to Patala.

### Why the Three steps ?

Mahabali symbolizes Samridhi (prosperity), the three feet symbolizes the three states of existence Jagrat (awake), Swapna (dream sleep) and Sushupti (deep sleep) and the final step is on his head which elevates us from these three states, unto moksha (spiritual liberation, release from rebirths).

# Parashurama Avatar

## defeater of tyrants

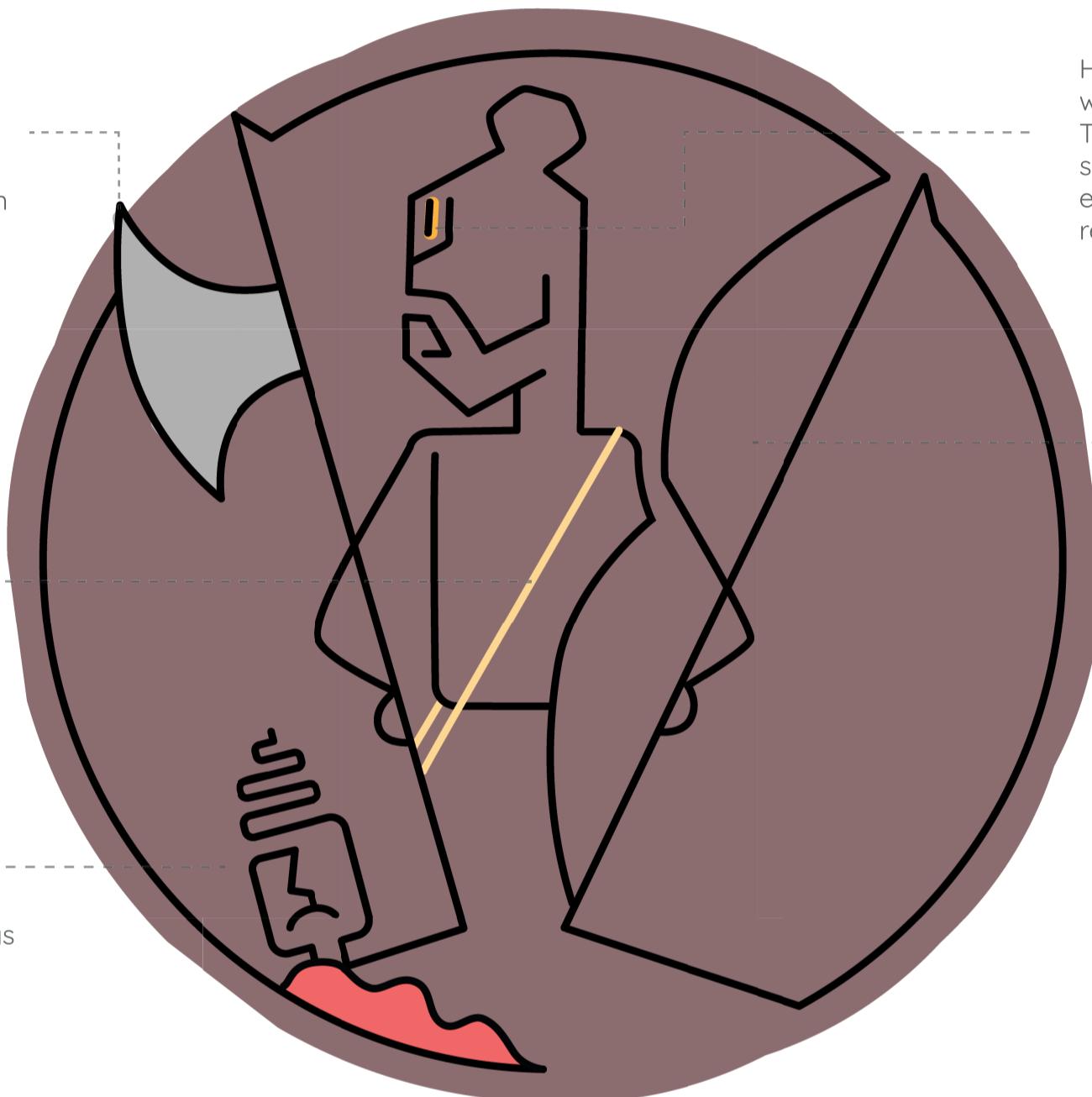
The Axe is used as a tool to cut wood for fire rituals and as a weapon to kill unrighteous kings. It signifies the conversion of the agrarian tool to a weapon.

Has a sacred mark made with sandalwood paste. The right and the left lines signify intellectual and emotional growth respectively.

Janeu is a sacred thread worn as a mark of one's acceptance in the school of Hinduism.

Bow and Arrows are the weapons of a warrior, used to kill at a distance.

Depicts unrighteous Kings killed by Parshurama.



### The Story

Parashurama was the son of the sage Jamadagni and his wife Renuka, living in a hut. They had a celestial cow called Surabhi which produced all that they desired. A king named Arjuna Kartavirya learnt about it and wanted the cow. He asked Jamadagni to give it to him, but the sage refused. While Parashurama was away from the hut, the king took it by force. Parashurama learnt about this crime, and gets upset. With his axe in his hand, he challenged the king to battle and defeated him. The warrior class challenged him, and he killed all his challengers. In Revenge, the king's son killed Jamadagni. When Parashurama returned to the ashram he saw his father's body and the 21 scars on it and took the pledge to kill 21 generations of all unjust Khshatriyas on the earth.

### Why the Rebel ?

The legend likely has roots in the ancient conflict between the Brahmin caste with religious duties and the Kshatriya caste with warrior and enforcement role as stated by James Lochtefeld.

### Morals

- Defend your rights
- Rulers cannot be tyrants
- Greed is a sin

### Locations of temples:



### Attributes

- Anger
- Loyalty
- Strength

# Rama Avatar

## righteous and holy king

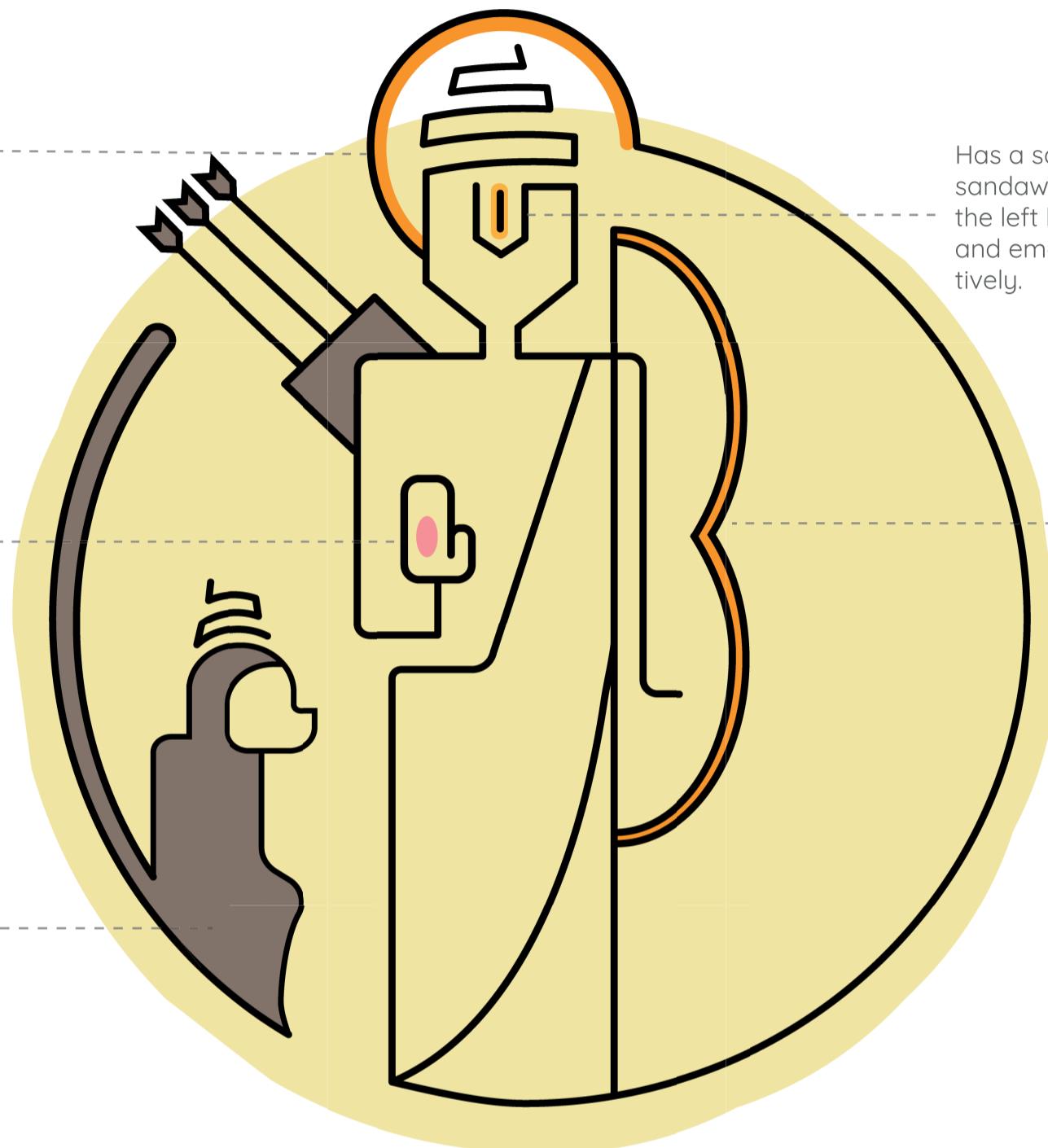
The Crown is the symbol of power and royalty.

Has a sacred mark made with sandalwood paste. The right and the left lines signify intellectual and emotional growth respectively.

Upward pointing palm addresses the fear of his subjects and grants them protection.

The Golden bow is the symbol of balance poise and royal birth.

Depicts Hanuman who is his most loyal disciple, and friend.



### The Story

Rama, prince of Ayodhya, won the hand of the beautiful princess Sita, but was exiled with her and his brother Lakshmana for 14 years through the plotting of his step-mother. In the forest, Sita was abducted by Ravana, a rival King. Rama gathered an army of monkeys and bears to search for her. The allies attacked Lanka, killed Ravana, and rescued Sita. In order to prove her chastity, Sita entered the fire, but was vindicated by the gods and restored to her husband. After the couple's triumphant return to Ayodhya, Rama's righteous rule (Ram-raj) inaugurated a golden age for all mankind.

### Why the righteous king?

The original five books of an oral epic of local northern significance dealing with a hero and his exile, the abduction of his wife by a rival king and her rescue became conflated into seven books in which the hero Rama became an avatar of the god Vishnu. The scene shifted to encompass the whole of India, and the struggle to recover his wife became a metaphor for the final triumph of the righteous.

### Morals

- One's duties and responsibilities to family and other dependents are most important
- Lust is a sin

### Attributes

- Intelligence
- Righteousness
- Kindness
- Strength

### Locations of temples:



# Balarama Avatar

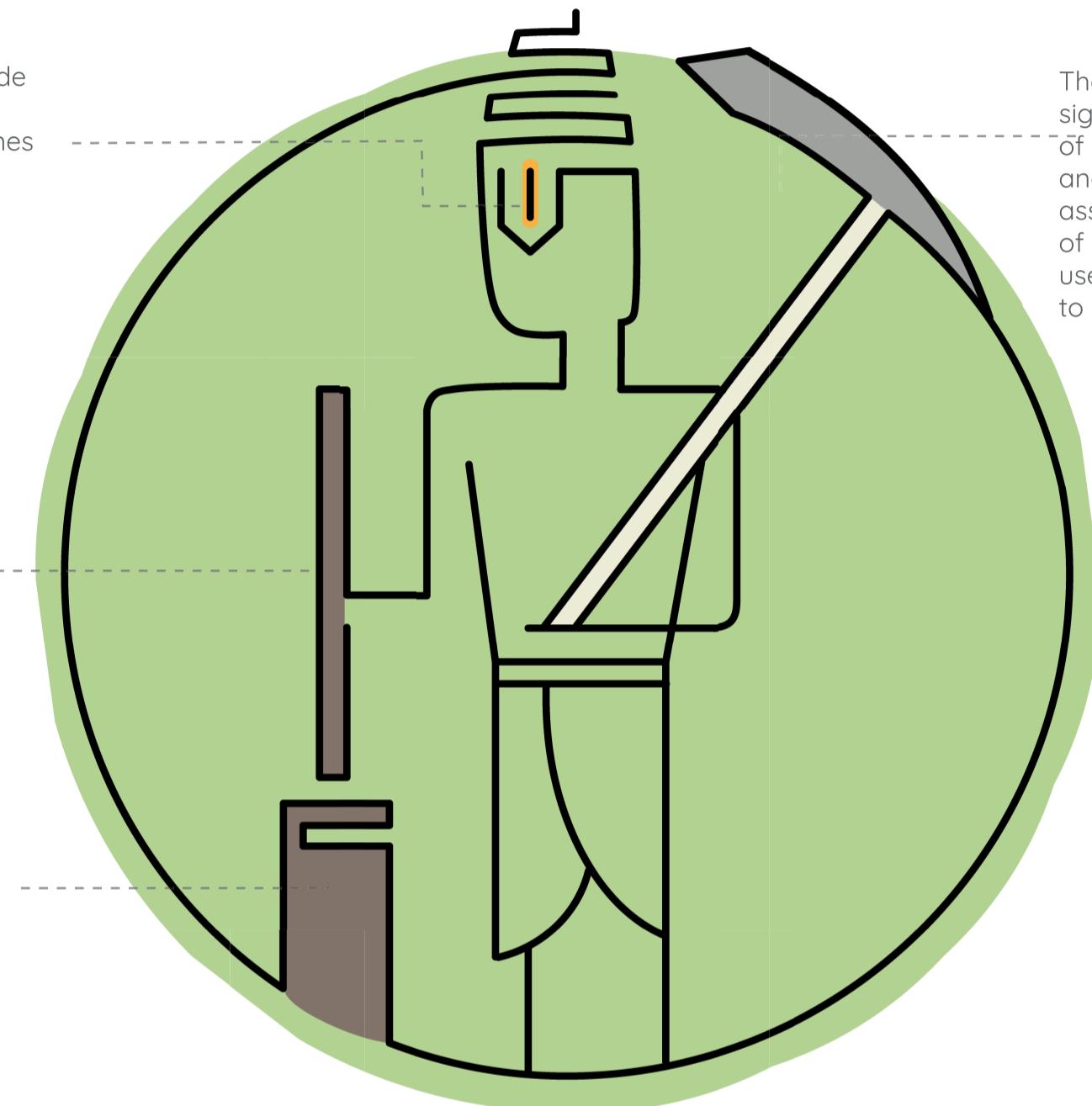
## friend of the farmers

Has a sacred mark made with sandalwood paste. The right and the left lines signify intellectual and emotional growth respectively.

The Plough, called Balachita, signifies strong associations of Balarama with farming and farmers. Indicates an association with lower strata of society. Balarama also used plough as a weapon to kill demons.

The Pestle, called Sunanda was used by Balarama to pound grain.

The mortar is a cup-shaped receptacle in which ingredients were crushed or ground.



### The Story

Krishna's brother Balarama, who was paying a visit to the area of Ambadi, felt like bathing in the river. Intoxicated with liquor and experiencing the heat of the alcohol, Balarama felt like taking a bath in the river. However, he refused to walk to the waters and called upon the river to come near him, but the chaste Yamuna refused. An angry Balarama dragged the river by his weapon - the plough and changed its course, hurting the river goddess. Terrified, the river assumed her form as a goddess and bowed to Balarama and asked his forgiveness. Her struggles gave rise to the many bends of the river around Delhi.

### Why the farmer?

The story according to some anthropologists is suggestive of canal irrigation by the Surasena tribe. Balarama with his plough was their god of agriculture while Krishna with his cows was their god of animal husbandry; together they were the gods of the primary economic activities of a civilization that according to archaeologists thrived as early as 600 BC.

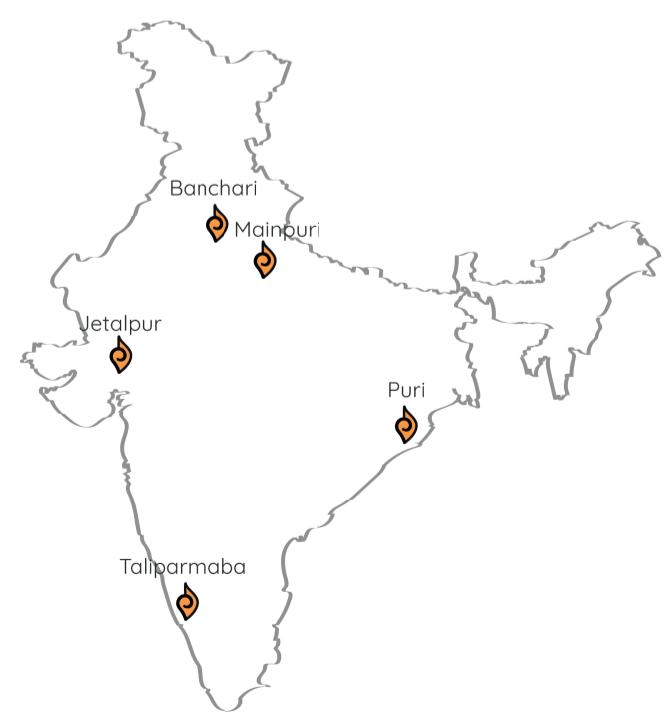
### Morals

- Creativity and Improvisation
- Controlling nature for man's benefit

### Attributes

- Intelligence
- Improvisation
- One with Nature
- Strength
- Anger

### Locations of temples:



# Krishna Avatar

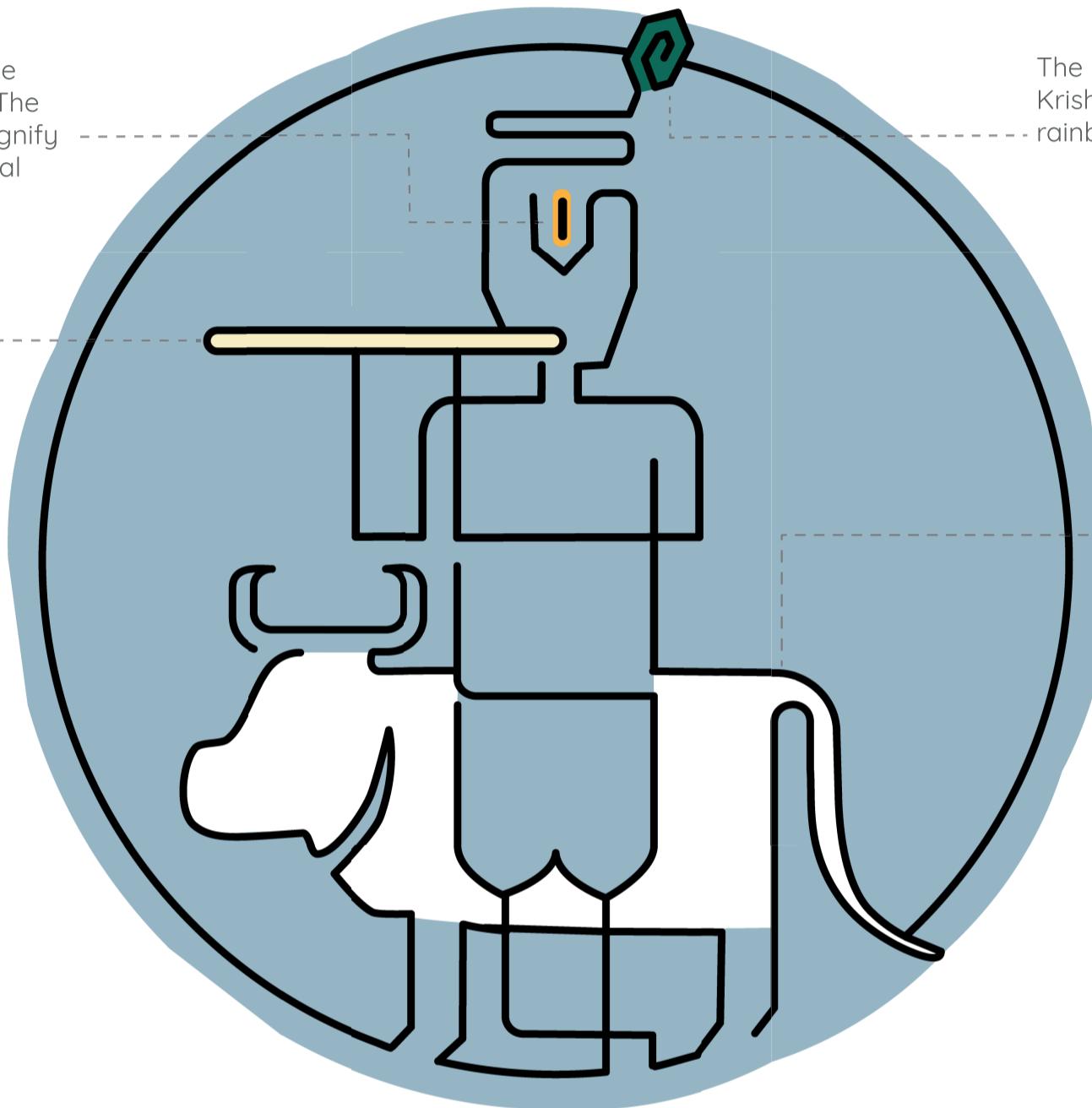
## the divine cowherd

Has a sacred mark made with sandalwood paste. The right and the left lines signify intellectual and emotional growth respectively.

The Peacock feather on Krishna's crown symbolizes his rainbow coloured personality.

Bansuri is an Indian flute which Krishna used to attract cows and milkmaids through gentle playful seduction.

Depicts the association of Krishna with animal husbandry.



### The Story

Krishna is also known by numerous names, such as Govinda, Mukunda, Madhusudhana, Vasudeva, and Makhan Chor. The anecdotes and narratives of Krishna's life are generally titled as Krishna Leela. He is a central character in the Mahabharata, the Bhagavata Purana and the Bhagavad Gita. They portray him in various perspectives: a god-child, a prankster, a model lover, a divine hero, and as the universal supreme being. Krishna's childhood illustrates the Hindu concept of lila, playing for fun and enjoyment and not for sport or gain. Krishna plays his flute and the gopis come immediately, from whatever they were doing, to the banks of the Yamuna River, and join him in singing and dancing.

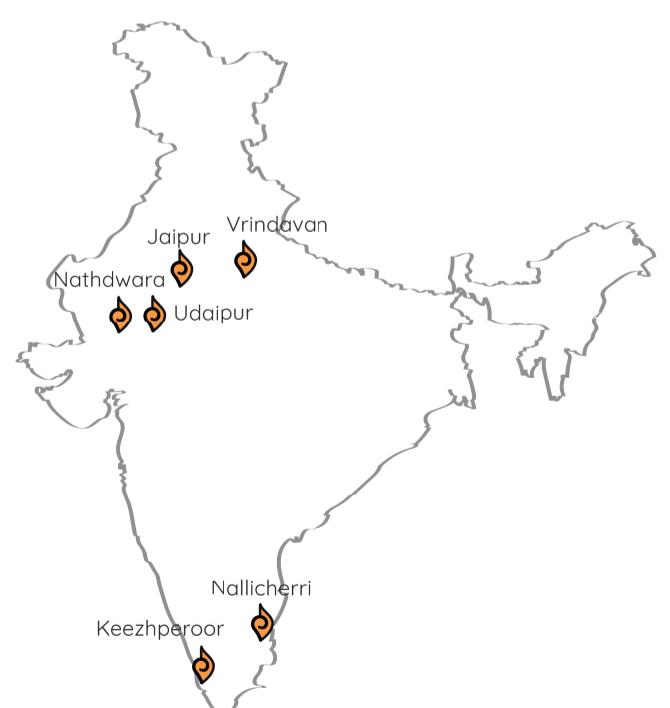
### Why the lover?

The longing and love-filled legends of Krishna and the gopis, his playful pranks as a baby, as well as his later dialogues with other characters, are philosophically treated as metaphors for the human longing for the divine and for meaning, and the play between the universal and the human soul. Krishna's lila is a theology of love-play.

### Morals

- Love is the emotion that connects mankind.
- Sense of duty and dharma
- Greed, Envy, Wrath, Pride are sins

### Locations of temples



### Attributes

- Intelligence
- Mischief
- Inspires devotion
- Creative - musician

# Kalki Avatar

## destroyer of filth

Has a sacred mark made with sandalwood paste. The right and the left lines signify intellectual and emotional growth respectively.

As mentioned in the Purana, Kalki will come on a white horse.

Ratna Maru is Lord Shiva's sword which Kalki uses as a weapon.



### The Story

It is prophesised that a divine being who will be the savior of the planet will be born in the family of Vishnuyasha, an eminent brahmana of Shambhala village, as Kalki. The name 'Kalki' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'kalka' - sediment or filth. He will be endowed with eight superhuman faculties, when the eight suns (represented by 8 solar deities) will together shine over the sky and will destroy all whose minds are devoted to evil. He will reestablish righteousness upon earth. He rides the horse Devadutta and carries Lord Shiva's sword Ratna Maru.

### Why the furious warrior?

The story of Kalki starts appearing in Hindu scriptures at the time when India was overrun by a whole host of foreign marauders from Central Asia. These were brutal and barbaric tribes such as the Huns and later the Mongols. The story was a clear response to their brutality. These new invaders were destroying the old way of life and it was hoped that Vishnu, as Kalki, would destroy the new ways, and restore life to the old ways.

### Morals

- Hope exists in the future
- Evil doers cannot escape from divine retribution
- Greed and pride are sins

### Locations of temples



### Attributes

- Intelligence
- Fury
- Strength

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