

“ BRAHMAVAIVARTA  
PURANA, RAMAYANA,  
AND THE UPANISHADS

## NEW GODS FROM BRAHMANISM TO EARLY HINDUISM

“ *Brahmavaivarta Purana*,  
800–1000 CE

In Sanskrit, *karma* means both “action” and “fate.” *Karma* is the consequence decided by what you do today.



This carving of Vishnu shows the deity with four arms holding symbols of his power: a mace, chakra, and conch shell.

“All creatures from Brahma to the small insect have to face the result of their deeds,” said the Vedic god Vishnu. If you were a student who never practiced your Vedas, or a farmer who let your land go to seed, or a craftsman who sold leaky pots, your parents or your wife or your customers would probably get angry with you. But that’s not all. What Vishnu meant was that you could pay in your *next* life for not meeting your duties in *this* one. Your actions had results, which were called *karma*. Many ancient South Asians believed that most people’s souls came back into the world after they died, and not necessarily in a human body. If you had earned bad karma, you might come back as a chicken, a fish, or a pig. Many ancient South Asians did not eat anything that flew, walked, or swam. Even a mosquito had a soul.

On the other hand, if you were especially good, you could come back as a Brahmin. Brahmins were considered to be the most pure of all human beings. Only they knew the hymns and rituals from the Vedas to call the gods and goddesses to the fire sacrifice. They knew how to start a fire with a bow drill and, once that fire was started, how to offer sacrificed animals and clarified butter (or “ghee”) to the flames as they chanted special hymns.

By around 1000 BCE, the Vedic rituals practiced by Brahmins began to change. Earlier traditions of the Indus civilization and other local beliefs began to creep back into use. The Brahmins began to use Harappan-style conch-shell ladles to pour sacrifices and blow Harappan-style conch shells to call the gods. They began to practice the ancient Harappan discipline of yoga and decorate the floors where they performed rituals with sacred designs called *mandalas*, made out of powdered conch shells and rice powder.





*Brahma is still being worshipped today in many parts of India. On this 11th-century sculpture two other faces of Brahma are seen in profile.*

the poor and to charitable organizations, and taking care of old and weak animals as well as people. They gave away all their wealth, devoted themselves to meditation, and made pilgrimages to sacred places.

Many of these sacred places were found along the shores of India's Ganges, or Ganga, River. Just as the Indus Valley civilization grew from the life-giving waters of the Indus and Saraswati Rivers, so the Brahmanical religion grew up along the banks

of the Ganga River. The people of ancient South Asia thought of the river as a beautiful goddess. According to the *Ramayana*, “[The] Ganga [river is] flowing along the valley, coming down from the Himalayas, carrying within her the essence of rare herbs and elements found on her way. She courses through many a kingdom, and every inch of the ground she touches becomes holy.”

The Ganga River may physically spring from the Himalaya Mountains, but according to some ancient South Asian myths, this goddess cascades from the top of a god's head. That god is Shiva, lord of creation and destruction, and beginning in about 1000 BCE he joined Brahma and Vishnu as one of the three major gods. Powerful Shiva is made up of the forces of the universe, according to some scriptures called the *Upanishads*:

Fire is in his forehead, the sun and moon are his eyes, the directions of space are his ears, the Veda is his voice, the wind that pervades the world is the breath which raises his chest, his feet are the earth. He is the inner self of all living beings.

“ *Ramayana*, 300–200 BCE

“ *Mundaka Upanishad*,  
700–300 BCE



Shiva has three eyes, which represent the sun, the moon, and a Supreme Force. When he opens his eye of Supreme Force, a flash of fire destroys his enemies, and blesses the good with wisdom. Shiva holds a trident, a three-pronged weapon to kill evil demons, in one hand and a conch shell in the other. The conch shell comes from the bones of a demon named Shankhachuda, whom Shiva

### MAJOR HINDU GODS AND GODDESSES

Brahma	god of creation	holds the four Vedas, a pot for ritual cleansing, prayer beads and a conch shell
Shiva	god of fertility	has a third eye to destroy evil
Vishnu	the "Preserver"	appears in ten different human forms, including Krishna
Ganesha	god of wisdom, remover of obstacles, elephant-headed son of Shiva and Parvati	holds a rod to clear obstacles from mankind's path
Lakshmi	goddess of beauty, luck, and wealth, also mother goddess, Vishnu's partner	carries lotus and swastika, which symbolize good luck and wealth
Ganga	mother and river goddess, Shiva's partner	rides a crocodile
Parvati	mother and protector goddess, Shiva's wife and Ganesha's mother	carries prayer beads, a mirror, bell, and a lime, which is a symbol of fertility; rides a tiger or lion
Kali	mother goddess and destroyer of evil, Shiva's partner	wears a necklace of the skulls of those she has destroyed
Saraswati	mother and river goddess, also goddess of wisdom and music, Vishnu's partner	plays a stringed instrument called a vina
Surya	sun god, life giver	rides in a chariot with seven horses





destroyed with the help of the god Vishnu. The shell represents Shiva's power. Not only does Shiva have one more eye than humans do, he is often described as having many hands that represent different aspects of his power. His hands may hold an axe to cut off the heads of evil demons; prayer beads; or a small drum for dancing. Shiva loves to dance, which represents the way the universe is always moving. Since he is responsible for death as well as life, he is often shown wearing snakes, which are symbols of death and decay, as is the waning crescent moon he wears in his piled and matted hair.

*Shiva often has many arms to show his power of creation and destruction. The Ganga River flows from his head, and the humped bull Nandi waits on him. He wears a necklace made from the heads of the many demons he has conquered.*



Shiva wears a pair of mismatched earrings. This jewelry represents his masculine side and his feminine side. The one in his right ear is in the shape of a crocodile-like creature. That one represents his masculine nature. His other earring is circular with a hole in the middle. It represents his feminine nature. Sometimes Shiva is shown half male and half

female to symbolize fertility. And sometimes Shiva is completely female. Then Shiva is known as Devi or the Mother Goddess. Devi changes her form depending on the circumstance. She can be either destructive or loving and gentle. Durga and Kali are terrible and extremely bloodthirsty forms of this goddess. Although they seem frightening, Durga and Kali are not out to get good people. They are there to destroy evil and demons. The Mother Goddess may also appear as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and Saraswati, the goddess of learning and music.

Shiva was not the only god that people began paying more attention to about 1000 BCE. People began telling more and more stories about Vishnu. Vishnu takes on a special form (called an avatar) and appears on earth to save people whenever some major obstacle or evil power threatens the universe. Krishna, who drives the chariot of Prince Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*, is actually Vishnu appearing as



a charioteer in order to lead the embattled prince to victory. Vishnu's job is to maintain the balance between good and evil in the universe. From time to time, it becomes necessary for Vishnu to destroy the universe, because there is too much evil and it has to be purified. But after a period of rest, the whole cycle of existence begins again.

In sculpture, Vishnu often has four hands, each holding a symbol of his power. In one hand he holds a conch shell which, just like Shiva's, symbolizes his power. In another hand, he wields a razor-sharp disk, a weapon that symbolizes the way intelligence can destroy all evil (the disk is called a *chakra*). In another hand, Vishnu holds a lotus, a flower that grows in water. Lotuses are rooted in mud but they blossom above the water. Vishnu's lotus is a symbol of his creative force and lordship over the universe. In his fourth hand, Vishnu holds a club or mace, which is a symbol of his power and knowledge.

Shiva and Vishnu often accompany Brahma. Brahma, who should not be confused with *brahman*, the Ultimate Supreme Being, is the oldest of the three major Hindu gods. Although all three gods are mentioned in the Vedas, Shiva and Vishnu didn't become really popular until later. In the *Ramayana*, Brahma himself says that "Of the Trinity, I am the Creator, Shiva is the Destroyer, and Vishnu is the Protector."

“ Ramayana, 300–200 BCE

Brahma rides a swan or goose to symbolize purity, detachment, and divine knowledge, and Vishnu and Shiva usually accompany him. Brahma represents the balance between forces that destroy and fragment the universe and those that create and unite. He is usually shown with four heads, facing north, south, east, and west, so that he can see everything (at one point he actually had a fifth head, but that was cut off by Shiva during a fight). His heads also represent the four Vedas and the four groups that people are divided into (called *varnas*). He is often shown with four arms that hold symbolic objects: a special pot with a spout that is used for ritual cleansing and represents the earth, the sustainer of all things; palm-leaf manuscripts, which represent the Vedas; prayer beads that he uses to recite prayers; and the sacred conch shell that calls the gods to sacrifices.



## RISE AND SHINE!

After starting breakfast, a Brahmin girl would help her mother with the daily household rituals. Using either white rice flour or ground conch shell, she would draw complex, mazelike designs in doorways and on steps. These drawings, called *mandalas*, were meant to welcome good spirits, and to capture and confuse evil spirits. Then she and her mother would light a sacred lamp to the goddess who protected their home. They would anoint the figure of the goddess with brilliant red vermilion powder, then dip their second littlest fingers into the lamp's oil, then into the red pigment, and carefully apply a red dot in the middle of their foreheads. This red dot symbolized their purity and association with the goddess. Once all these rituals were completed, it was time to wake the men.



Back among mere mortals, the Brahmin men—and only the Brahmin men—were taught the sacred scriptures and conducted sacrifices. And that was the main job they were born to do. If they took on some other responsibility, they could ruin their chances of joining *brahman*. In early Vedic times, every kind of responsibility was delegated to a particular group, or *varna*. For example, people of the Kshatriya group owned land, fought wars, and ran the government. The members of the Vaisya *varna* became craftsmen and traders. The Shudra group worked the land, swept the streets, emptied the latrines, and collected garbage and dumped it outside the city. Although at first it was possible for people to move from one *varna* to another, changing places was discouraged, and after about 1000 BCE, it was not allowed at all.

Based on what *varna* you were born into, your career was decided for you. Any say you had in the matter was narrowed even further by whether you were a boy or a girl. Brahmin boys learned the rituals and scriptures that their fathers, brothers, and uncles did. Brahmin girls and women fed and clothed their families and cared for the young, the elderly, and the sick. They also performed religious rituals, especially the daily worship of the goddess who protects





The three most important Hindu gods—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva—appear, from left to right, on this 19th-century painting. Brahma and Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and music, ride Hamsa the swan. Vishnu and Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune and prosperity, sit on Garuda, who is half-man, half-eagle. And Shiva and Parvati, the goddess of childbirth, ride the white bull Nandi. They are followed by Shiva and Parvati's son, Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of good luck, and Hanuman.

the home and family. Many aspects of women's worship was not part of the early Vedic scriptures—it was handed down from mother to daughter from very ancient times.

We don't know very much about women and men from the lower classes, because the records we have, the Vedas, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Ramayana*, are about the upper classes. Many scholars believe that the need to earn a living meant that men and women worked together more equally among the other classes than they did among the Brahmins. Non-Brahmin women were allowed and even encouraged to get an education and sometimes were trained in warfare.

The earlier Vedic religion was changing. Animal sacrifices were being replaced with butter and fruit offerings, new gods were emphasized instead of Agni and Brahma, and people couldn't move between the *varnas* at all. In time, these new practices became known as **Hinduism**.

But not everyone found meaning and comfort in sacrifices and strict social divisions. By the sixth century BCE, two young men were struggling to find gentler, more peaceable ways of finding God. Their names were Mahavira and Siddhartha Gautama, and their efforts would give birth to two of the world's great religions, Jainism and Buddhism.

*Hindu*, from the word *Indus*, is the 19th-century British name for non-Muslim South Asians. Today, Hindu refers to people who believe in reincarnation and worship gods and goddesses like Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi. Hinduism isn't so much a single unified religion as a family of religious traditions.