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Brahma the Creator Amongst the Hindu Trinity

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Hindu Trinity

*Aum Bhur Bhuva Swaha
Tat Savitur Varenyam
Bhargo Devasya Dheemahi
Dhiyo Yo Nah Prachodayat*

The protector who is the basis of the whole universe and who is self-existent and who is free from all pains and whose contact frees the soul from all troubles exists in different forms in this universe and sustains all. He is the creator and energizer of the whole universe, the giver of all happiness, worthy of acceptance, pure and purifier. That very God let us embrace, so that God may direct our mind and thoughts.

- Gayatri Mantra, a popular Hindu Mantra or Hymn

*Eka Mai Jugat Viyaae Tin Chele Parvan
Ik Sansari Ik Bhandari Ik Lae Diban
Jiv Tis Bhav Tivey Chalavey Jiv Hove Phurman
Ohu Vekhe Ona Nadar Na Avey Bahuta Ehu Vidan*

*The Supreme spirit manifested Maya
Who conceived and delivered the Holy Triad
The Creator, the Sustainer and the Destroyer
Yet He ordains as pleases Him for the Triad to act
Even they see Him not Who Sees All
This remains the greatest wonder of all*

- Rajender Krishan

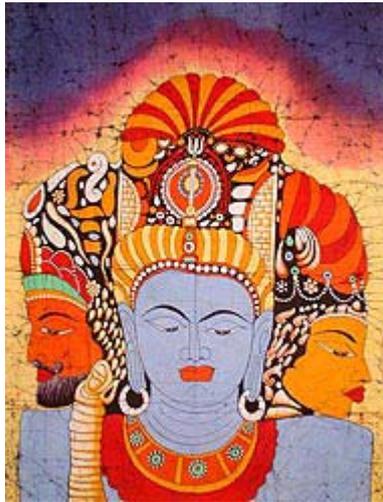
The plethora of deistic traditions under the umbrella of the Hindu religion, are united through the concept of the Trimurti or trinity. One finds depictions of this concept in beautiful art works or religious texts and ritualistic verses in Hinduism. However, in practice it is more of a philosophical symbol which depicts the three aspects of the Supreme Being, all of which need to concur for the creation, preservation and eventual destruction of all that exists in the Universe.

The Trimurti (literally indicating three forms or trinity), is the representation of the three projections of the Supreme Reality, each with a specific cosmic function. These manifestations are that of Brahma (serving the cosmic function of creation), Vishnu (serving the cosmic function of renewal and preservation), and Shiva (serving the cosmic function of dissolution or destruction that precedes re-creation) – the three popular Hindu gods. Our daily existence reflects these three cosmic functions as birth, life and death. A somewhat similar symbolization exists in the Christian trinity of God as the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. However the interpretation and philosophy behind the Christian and Hindu concepts of the trinity differ.



The trinity is interpreted in various forms in Hindu philosophy. A widely accepted belief is that it represents earth, water, and fire. The earth, or Brahma, is seen as the originator of all life and

hence is regarded as the Creator. Water is the sustainer of life and hence is the Preserver and is represented as Vishnu. Fire destructs life and hence is the Destroyer and is represented as Shiva.



The trinity also represents the three fundamental gunas or qualities, as described in the Bhagavad-Gita - the sacred Hindu philosophical text. These qualities are the quality of passion or desire (rajas – as represented by Brahma, because passion or desire results in procreation), the quality of mercy (satva – as represented by Vishnu, because mercy preserves life), and the quality of darkness and wrath (tamas – as represented by Shiva, because darkness equates with the annihilated state of the universe).

The Trinity represents three individual forms on the different planes of Consciousness. On the Physical plane, the psychic element is represented by Brahma, the mental element by Vishnu, and the physical element by Shiva. On the mental plane, Brahma is the intuitive and creative thought, Vishnu is intelligence and Shiva stands for emotions and feelings. The Sky as Brahma, the Sun as Vishnu and the Moon as Shiva form the earthly plane.

Various phases of an individual's life are said to be represented by the Trinity. The first of these phases, that of celibacy and studentship, (Brahmacharya Ashram) – is represented by Brahma. During this phase, knowledge is the individual's constant companion. Knowledge of course is represented by Goddess Saraswati, who is said to be the consort of Brahma.



The second phase of adulthood and household (Grihastha Ashram) is represented by Vishnu. During this phase, the individual fulfills all religious and family obligations by involving oneself in generating wealth, which one uses to sustain oneself and one's family. During this phase wealth is the individual's companion and is represented by Vishnu's consort, Goddess Lakshmi.



The third phase is that of old age (Vanaprastha Ashram) and is represented by Shiva. This phase marks the renunciation of one's worldly life for a life void of material pleasures, dedicated to the pursuit of true knowledge. In ancient days, this typically marked the time when a householder, along with his wife, left their worldly belongings to spend their life in a forest, just like Lord Shiva leads a homeless life with only the essential belongings.



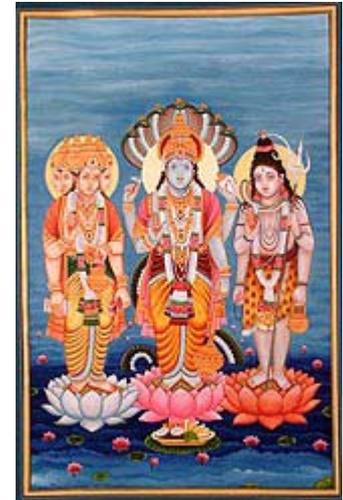
The final phase (Sanayasa Ashram) the individual seeks to merge oneself with the Supreme power (Ishwara). One completes the process of renunciation and he along with his wife lead a life completely untouched by any attachments. The only occupation becomes deep meditation, leading to the individual becoming Ishwara Himself, with his wife as Ishwara's consort becoming the Universal Mother.

The three phases of life, represented by the Trinity thus culminates into One underlining the fact that the three are in reality one and the same Ishwara.

An interesting legend illustrates this concept beautifully. Once, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva were boasting about their great powers. All of a sudden, a young boy came forth, and asked Brahma as to what he creates. Brahma quickly replied with pride, "Everything". When he asked Vishnu and Shiva as to what they sustain and destroy respectively, he got the same reply from both Gods – "Everything". Showing Brahma a small straw, the young boy asked him if he could create a straw just like the one he was holding. However, even after a great deal of effort, Brahma was unable to do so. The child then turned upon Vishnu and asked him whether he could preserve the dissolving form of the straw but Vishnu looked on helplessly. The child finally asked Shiva to destroy the small straw but despite Shiva's best efforts, the straw still remained as it was. Then the boy turned again towards Brahma and asked him whether he was the child's creator. Even after great thought Brahma could not remember having created this bright child. The child then suddenly vanished, and the three Gods then remembered that there always is the Supreme God behind their amazing powers.

Each of the Gods in the Trinity has a consort and each God is inseparable from his female part, or Shakti (cosmic power or cosmic force). Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge is the consort of Brahma. Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, love, beauty and delight is Vishnu's consort. Shiva has Parvati as his consort, the Goddess of power, destruction and transformation. Just as the Trinity, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati are the three main goddesses in Hindu religion. The three Goddesses are often worshipped individually, as also as spouses of the Trinity Gods.

The Puranas say that the Trimurti (Trinity) originated from Adi Shakti – or the Supreme cosmic Energy – as symbolized by a female form – the universal Mother. The Trimurti was originally worshipped as a single deity, as a representation of the Brahman or the Supreme Being. However later, each God was separated from the single form and now the unified form is not worshipped anymore. Of the three Gods forming the Trimurti, Brahma is not worshipped except at a very few places while Vishnu and Shiva both have huge followings.



Brahma, the Creator

Hindu mythology addresses Brahma – the omniscient, the source of all that exists, the causation of all forms and events - by various names. He is the single syllable “Om” – the eka aksharam (single letter). As the self-born uncreated creator, he is Swayambhu. As the first manifestation of one's existence he is Ahankara. As the embryo from which the universe originates, he is Hiranya Garbha (golden embryo), the ball of fire. As all creatures are his progeny, he is Prajapati (king of kings). He is also Pitamaha (patriarch), Vidhi (ordinator), Lokeshha (master of the universe) and Viswakarma (architect of the world).



Some Hindu texts say that Brahma emerged from Brahman, the Supreme Being – the Consciousness. Brahman wanted to create the universe. To this end, he first created water, into which he deposited his seed. This seed became a golden egg, and from this egg, he was born as Brahma or Hiranyagarbha, born from the golden egg. Since he was born in water, he is also known as Kanja (water born).

The Mahabharata gives a separate version of Brahma's origin in which, Brahma arose from a lotus (Kamala) with thousand petals that grew out of Vishnu's navel (Nabhi). This legend explains his name Nabhija (navel born).

According to the Puranas, Brahma is said to be the son of the Supreme Being and his female energy, Maya – the



cosmic illusion which keeps all life under a veil of separation from the Supreme One.

It is said that Brahma creates and recreates the universe time and again. One creation of his lasts one Brahma-day which is equivalent to a period of 4,320,000,000 human years in terms of the Hindu calendar. Each Brahma-day (Kalpa) comprises a thousand Mahayugas each of which comprises the four Yugas or Ages.

1. KRITA (OR SATYA)-YUGA $432,000 \times 4 = 1,728,000$ years
2. TRETA-YUGA $432,000 \times 3 = 1,296,000$ years
3. DWAPARA-YUGA $432,000 \times 2 = 864,000$ years
4. KALI-YUGA $432,000 \times 1 = 432,000$ years

TOTAL 4,320,000 years

It is said that each Yuga's length decreases progressively in relation to increasing moral and physical decadence in each age. As a result, in Krita Yuga, virtue prevails while evil is unknown while in Kaliyuga, evil takes a strong grip.

When Brahma goes to sleep at night after the end of his day, all of his creations get dissolved into the universe. The night again lasts for the same period as the day. The dissolution of the universe during the Brahma-night is called the Pralaya. When he awakes he again restores the whole creation for the next Kalpa.

Brahma is said to have a life of hundred Brahma-years, each year comprising 720 Kalpas (360 each Brahma-days and Brahma-nights). This process of creation and dissolution goes on till the hundred years of Brahma's life are completed. At the end of these hundred Brahma years, all that exists, including Brahma and all other Gods – the whole universe - dissolves into its constituent elements.

At the beginning of the process of creation, Brahma created ten Prajapatis, who are believed to be the fathers of the human race. The Manusmriti enumerates them as Marichi, Atri, Angirasa, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu, Vasishtha, Prachetas or Daksha, Bhrigu, and Narada. He is also said to have created the seven great sages or the Saptarishi to help him create the universe. However since all these sons of his were born out of his mind rather than body, they are called Manas Putras or mind-sons.

The depiction of Brahma in Hindu art and religious texts is replete with interesting legends and interpretations.

In addition to being the creator of the universe, Brahma delegates various duties to all creatures, and based on these he decides the incarnations to be bestowed on each creature. To be fully aware of the deeds of all creatures at all times is therefore indispensable and hence Lord Brahma is shown with four heads, to look in all four directions.



The four heads of Brahma has earned him the name Chatur Mukha (the one with four heads). The heads represent the four Vedas – holy Hindu text (Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda). They also symbolize the four Yugas – epochs of time (Krita Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dwapara Yuga and Kali Yuga) as well as the four castes or Varnas (Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra). The four castes are believed to have originated from the various body parts of Brahma: the Brahmanas from his head, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his thighs, and the Shudras from his feet.

Even though Brahma is typically shown as having four heads looking in the four directions, legend holds it that at one time he had five heads, the fifth looking upwards. However originally he is said to have possessed just one head. At that time the cosmos did not exist and Brahma was self-contained and self-content. However he eventually started longing for company. At this time, he split himself to form a female form, called Satarupa (the one with a hundred beautiful forms). As he laid his gaze upon Satarupa, Brahma immediately felt attracted towards her. To avoid Brahma's gaze, Satarupa tried to slip off in various directions but was unsuccessful as Brahma developed a head in each direction. Finding no other way, Satarupa start ascending upwards but then too, Brahma developed a head that looked upwards. Shiva noticed all that was happening. Since Satarupa originated out of Brahma, Shiva felt Satarupa was a daughter of Brahma and hence it was improper of Brahma to be obsessed with her. Shiva therefore cut off the head of Brahma that looked upwards so she could escape him. As an additional punishment for this unholy behaviour of Brahma, Shiva cast a curse on him and directed that there be no proper worship of Brahma. Ever since, only Vishnu and Shiva out of the three Gods comprising the Trinity are worshipped while Brahma is almost totally ignored. It is also said that since then Brahma has been trying to redeem himself of his sins by continuously reciting the four Vedas. According to Shiva Purana, the incestuous union of Brahma and Satarupa resulted in the birth of Swyambhu Manu, who eventually turned out to be the progenitor of Man.

There exists another version of the cutting off of Brahma's fifth head. According to the Puranas, Brahma and Vishnu once had an argument over who was the Supreme God. The Vedas however declared Shiva as the Supreme Being. Having discovered this, Brahma started speaking insultingly about Shiva. To teach Brahma a lesson, Shiva cut off the head which had spoken, and therefore Brahma was left with four heads.

In spite of being one among the three gods forming the Trinity, worshipping of Brahma worship is not as widespread as worshipping of Shiva or Vishnu. In India, there are only two temples dedicated to Brahma, as against thousands dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu. One of these two temples is at Pushkar near Ajmer in Rajasthan. The other is at Khedabrahma in Kerala. It is believed that once Lord Shiva stood in the form of a great linga with no end under the ground or in the sky. Brahma and Vishnu threw each other a challenge of superiority in which one of the ends had to be reached. Vishnu took the form of a swan and flew upwards while Brahma turned into a boar and started digging into the ground. However, even after a lot of efforts, neither of the two found the end of the linga. However to exert his superiority, Brahma came back and lied to Vishnu about having found the end of the linga underground. Shiva flew into a rage as soon as Brahma uttered the lie and took his own form from the linga and cast a curse on Brahma and

declared that he would never be worshipped. Further, since the Ketaki flower stood witness to Brahma's blatant lie, Shiva cursed the flower as well and since then the Ketaki flower is not used in religious rituals.

Since Brahma is the creator of all life and hence our ancestor, and his existence has been for ages beyond our comprehension – since in a day of Brahma's life eons pass, his appearance is made to match the near eternal nature of his existence by depiction of a white beard on all the four faces and eyes closed in meditation.

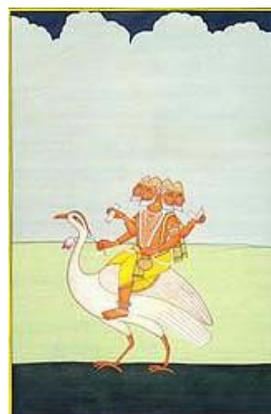
Brahma is typically shown without any form of weapons. Since he is also called the lord of sacrifices, he is shown holding a scepter in the form of a spoon, which is associated with the pouring of holy ghee or oil into a sacrificial pyre. Some depictions of Brahma however do show him holding a bow, which is said to be the weapon of Brahma. Lord Brahma is depicted as holding a coconut shell bowl filled with water, in one of his hands. The significance of the water is that initial all encompassing ether in which the first element of creation evolved. In another hand of Brahmas are held the Vedas, which are considered to be the primeval text of creation – containing all the knowledge there was, is and will ever be. It is said that even the Pralayas could not destroy the Vedas since Brahma himself took incarnations to save the Vedas during the deluges. The Vedas have neither origin nor end and reminds Brahma of his previous Kalpa. The indestructible nature of the Vedas signifies the fact that all except truth – the Supreme Consciousness - is destructible. A Rosary adorns another hand of Lord Brahma. The rosary signifies the importance of reminding oneself of the almighty, the Supreme God, by reciting His name through the mundane passage of each day in one's life. Lord Brahma's hand postures (mudras) are those of Abhaya (protector) and Varada (giver of boons). Both the postures have the palms facing outward, with the former being that of the fingers of the palm facing upwards while the latter has the fingers facing downward.

Brahma resides in what is known as Brahmaloaka. His abode is said to contain all the splendors of earth and of the heavens of the other gods. He is typically shown in one of the two forms of a standing or sitting position on a lotus or of a sitting position on a Hamsa (swan). The lotus is known to grow in muck. The seat of Lord Brahma as the lotus signifies that one should try to attain freedom from the shackles of influences of one's origin in passion and illusion.

A divine white swan or goose is depicted as the vehicle of Brahma. This divine bird is bestowed with a virtue called Neera-Ksheera Viveka or the ability to separate milk and water from a mixture of the two. The significance of this is that justice should be dispensed to all creatures, however entwined it might be in a situation. Also, this virtue indicates that one should learn to separate the good from the evil and then accept that which is valuable and discard that which is worthless or evil.



G o d d e s s



Saraswati is

Brahma's consort and feminine counterpart. She is the Goddess of wisdom and knowledge. Her name comprises two Sanskrit terms – Sara or essence and Swa or self, which indicates a connotation of the Essence of the Self. Literally, however, the word Saraswati means “the one which flows”. The Rigveda mentions Saraswati in the form of a divine river and hence gets associated with fertility and purification. She has some other designations too – Sarada - the giver of essence; Vageshvari – the mistress of speech; Brahmi - the wife of Brahma; and Mahavidya – the supreme knowledge.



Brahma's creative force is represented by Saraswati, who is the master of the 64 arts. Being the Goddess of Knowledge, she is the worshipped deity of all those, seeking and dispensing knowledge of any form, viz. both teachers and students. She is depicted as an extremely fair, young and beautiful lady with four arms and as attired in a white sari and as sitting on a white lotus flower. A white swan is also shown as her accompanying divine vehicle.



She holds in her hands a stringed instrument – the divine Veena – since she is the master of the arts. In her right hands she holds a book made of palm leaves and a lotus, signifying the need of using knowledge with love and kindness for the good of all creation. On her left hand she wears a necklace of pearls, which symbolize meditation and the path leading to oneness with God – the state of Samadhi. The two arms on the front represent her presence in the physical world while the arms on the back represent her presence in the spiritual world. Brahma along with Saraswati, represents the spirit of the Vedas, from which all knowledge originates.

Various Hindu mythological legends tell tales of how Brahma's lack of discretion in granting boons to even demons led to great damages to the Universe. At all these occasions Vishnu has had to appear and set right the bad situations precipitated by the powers bestowed upon the demons thanks to the boons of Brahma. This ungodly trait of Brahma contributes to his unpopularity in terms of a deity. Further the nature of his cosmic function of procreation leads naturally to thoughts of passion and the flesh which is attributed a somewhat less desired connotation than thoughts of the soul and God. Another extension of his cosmic functionality being the cause of the lack of popularity is the fact that his active function ceases since he has already created the universe and now Vishnu and Shiva have active roles to play. As a result people tend to flock more to Vishnu and Shiva than to Brahma.

Brahma will, of course, exert his powers during the creation of a new universe after this one is destroyed and to that extent, his role as the master creator and the originator of all knowledge will always remain in the minds of all Hindus.

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This article was written by Madhuri Guin

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