



The Hindu Pantheon is replete with interesting and entertaining stories and legends about the various Gods and Goddesses. What is special about these epics, stories and legends is that each of these anecdotes come with a little lesson hidden in them – something that sounds mundane, yet have a great spiritual connotation behind them.

Many of the main Indian Gods and Goddesses (Devas and Devis) have their own vehicles, mounts or vahanas that comprise various types of animals and birds. While this seems peculiar at first glance, there is a deep inner significance behind their choosing particularly those vahanas. This detailed article gives you invaluable information about these vahanas and their significance both in mundane and spiritual terms.

Sometimes, the deity is shown mounted on or riding his or her vehicle, while at other times, the vahana is shown by the deity's side. Many times, this vehicle is also represented by way of symbolisms, as a divine attribute. Though the vahana appears to be independent, it is part and parcel of the deity's presence and has an emblematic or syntagmatic inner meaning to it. Sometimes, the deity's vehicle may also symbolize the evil force, which the deity embodies.

We now take a detailed look at the various main Devatas and their vahanas.

### Garuda – Sri Maha Vishnu's Vahana



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**GARUDA - THE  
DIVINE VEHICLE  
OF LORD VISHNU**

The Garuda, the vahana of Sri Maha Vishnu, one of the Divine Trinity, is a large mythical eagle-like entity that is part of both Hindu and Buddhist culture. The Garuda is often depicted as having a shiny, golden body, red wings, white face, a sharp, eagle's beak and a man's body. He is a powerful creature, full of energy and a size big enough to block the Sun God Himself!

The Garuda is one of the most powerful demigods and is given an important place in Indian mythology. This can be gauged by the very fact that there is a complete Upanishad and Purana (Garudopanishad and Garuda Purana respectively) on him. Garuda has several other names such as Syena, Gaganeshvara, Chirada, Khageshvara, Kashyapi, Kamayusha, Sitanana, Sudhahara, Nagantaka, Tarkshya, Suparna, Vishnuratha, Vainateya and so on.

## Garuda's true power

Garuda has always played a very important and vital role in his master, Vishnu's life. In fact, Indian art itself is a testimony to Garuda's gigantic persona. It is said that the Veda chants can be heard with each movement of Garuda's massive wings. There are several Indian sculptures and paintings that depict Vishnu and His consort, Lakshmi, seated on the bird. Krishna also carries an image of Garuda on His banner.

According to the Vedas, Syena was the one responsible for delivering the Deva Amrut (nectar of immortality) from earth to heaven. Worshipping this divine bird is even said to remove poison from one's body. Lord Krishna Himself declared in the middle of Kurukshetra, the battlefield, "Of birds, I am the son of Vinata (Garuda)". Krishna and His consort, Satyabhama rode on him to kill Narakasura. In yet another incident, Krishna mounts Garuda to save His elephant devotee, Gajendra.



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**LORD VISHNU AND  
LAKSHMI RIDING ON  
DIVINE VEHICLE GARUDA**

## Garuda's birth

Garuda was born to sage Kashyap and Vinata. When Garuda first emerged from his egg, he appeared as a raging inferno, consuming all in its wake. When the Devas pleaded with him for mercy, he consented and reduced his own size and energy.

## Reaching the Amrut to the Devas

Vinata, the sister of Kadru, the mother of serpents, once lost a bet to her sister and consequently became enslaved to her. In a bid to free his mother from the bondage, Garuda promised to bring the serpents Amrut, in exchange for his mother's freedom. This elixir was at that time fiercely guarded by the gods and was kept safely within a fiery ring that covered the entire sky. This was further protected by a machine with sharp rotating blades. The potion was further guarded by two vicious poisonous serpents.

The gods, knowing Garuda's intentions, proceeded to save the elixir by stationing a huge army against him. But Garuda destroyed them effortlessly. Then, collecting the water of many rivers in his mouth, he extinguished the fires surrounding the potion. Becoming a fraction of his size, he then maneuvered his way through the rotating blades, killed the two serpents and took the pot of nectar in his mouth.

On the way back, he met Vishnu. While Vishnu promised him immortality without having to consume the nectar, Garuda promised he would become His permanent mount. He also met Indra, to whom he promised that he would indeed deliver the nectar back to the Devas. Indra, in turn, promised Garuda the serpents as food.

Finally freeing his mother, Garuda asked the serpents to finish their religious rites before consuming the amrut. While they were at it, Indra made off with the pot. Garuda thus became the ally of the gods and the vehicle of Sri Vishnu.

Garuda is said to have had six sons who gave rise to the species of the birds. Like Garuda, they too were strong beyond compare and also preyed on the snakes as did Garuda. Lord Vishnu continued to be their Protector as well.

## Garuda in Buddhism



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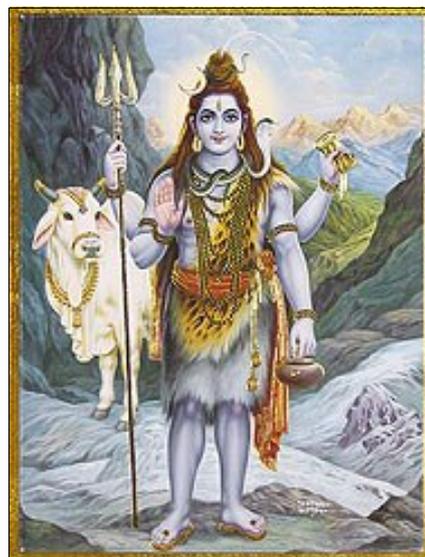
**GARUDA MASK IN  
BUDDHIST STYLE**

In Buddhism, the Garuda is said to be a huge bird, his wings spanning several miles! He is said to have amazing power, intelligence, strength and wisdom and can change to human form at will. There are some stories which even talk of Garuda kings having romantic dalliances with human women. The Buddha, in the Mahasamyatta Sutra, is shown as making peace, albeit temporarily, between the Nagas (serpents) and the Garudas.

The concept of Garuda is also seen in Indonesian, Thai, Japanese and Mongolian culture. While the Garuda is the national symbol of both Thailand and Indonesia, it is the symbol of Ulan Bator, the capital city of Mongolia.

## Nandi – Shiva's mount

Nandi, the Bull, is Lord Maheswara's (Shiva) gatekeeper and mount. Nandi is a Shiva bhakta (devotee) and the most important of Shiva's ganas. Like Garuda for Vishnu, Nandi too plays a major role in Shiva's life. One can see a statue of the bull, facing the Lord's idol, in most Shiva shrines. There are several temples built solely to worship Nandi as well.



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**SHIVA WITH NANDI**



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### INDUS VALLEY BULL IMAGE

Unlike Garuda, who is a lesser god, Nandi is considered a separate, powerful god, whose history can be traced right from the Indus Valley Civilization. Dairy farming was the most important occupation then and so, the Nandi was given much respect at that time. There was also a deity, much like Shiva, who was then worshipped as the Pasupati (the caretaker of herds).

In some Puranas, the Nandikeswara features as one with a bull's face and human body which is similar to Shiva Himself. He is shown with four hands, two holding the Parasu (axe) and the Mruga (antelope) and the other two folded in

prayer. In Sanskrit, the word for 'bull' is 'vrisha', which also means Dharma or righteousness. This is why it is considered appropriate to seek the blessings of Nandi even before bowing down to Shiva!

While the Puranas consider Nandikeswara to be the leader of the Siva Ganas, he is also said to be the principal disciple of Shiva, also a primal guru to Siddhar Thirumulanathar, Patanjalinathar and many others of the ancient Natha / Siddhar tradition.

### Nandi's birth

There are no accurate records of Nandi's birth. According to some Puranas, he was born from Vishnu's right side, exactly resembled Shiva and was brought up by sage Salankayana. Yet other Puranas say that he was born by the grace of Shiva to sage Silada.

### Popular legends

Nandi cursed the ten-headed asura king, Ravana, that he and his kingdom would be destroyed by a Vanara (monkey). Hanuman was the one that burnt and destroyed Lanka.

Shiva and Parvati once played a game of dice, in which Nandi agreed to become the umpire. Though Shiva lost the game, Nandi declared Him the winner, as he was His favorite. Thereupon, Parvati lost her temper and cursed Nandi that he would die of a terrible and incurable disease. When Nandi begged for forgiveness and told Her he had lied only to protect his Master, Parvati relented and offered him a way of atonement and release from her curse. She asked him to offer his favorite foodstuff (grass) to Her son, Lord Ganesha, on the latter's birthday. Nandi did as he was told and was immediately released from the curse. This is also why people offer Arugampul (a type of medicinal grass) to Ganesha during prayer.

During the Samudra Manthan (churning of the Ocean of Milk) episode, Shiva swallowed Halahala, the deadly poison that arose from the sea. When Nandi saw a few drops of the poison falling to the ground, he immediately licked it off the ground. All observing were shocked and fearful of Nandi's state after consuming the poison, but Shiva smilingly assured them that the bull would not come to any harm, as he had completely surrendered his will to his lord and master, Shiva.

Nandi's white color is symbolic of his purity and sense of justice. Even today, women worship Nandi as a bestower of fertility.

## Nandi idols

The largest Nandi idols throughout India can be found at Lepakshi, Thanjavur, Chamundi Hills at Mysore, Bull Temple at Bangalore, Rameswaram and Hoysaleswara Temple at Halebidu, Karnataka.

## Egyptian and Greek mythology

In Egyptian mythology, Apis or Hapis, a bull-dieity is worshipped as a major deity in the Memphis area. Greeks believe that Apis is an incarnation of Osiris. Romans also give Apis a divine status in their culture.



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**NANDI STATUE**

## Mooshika, the rat – Ganesha's vehicle



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**GANESHA**

Ganesha, the elephant-headed Lord and the remover of obstacles, is one of the most revered Gods in the Hindu Pantheon. Also known as Ganpati, Vighnesha, Vinayaka and Pillaiyar, this son of Shiva and Parvati is worshipped by people from many cultures and religions across the length and breadth of the country and beyond.

Ganesha is known to be the Deva of intelligence and wisdom. He is also said to be a patron of the arts and sciences. This Gananayaka (Lord of the Ganas) is propitiated before the start of any ceremony or ritual and is also invoked as the Lord of Letters before the start of writing sessions.

## Mooshika

Some of the earliest depictions do not show Lord Ganesha with a vahana at all. The Mudgala Purana talks of eight incarnations of the Lord, in which Ganesha has a mouse in five of them. As Vakratunda, he uses a lion as a vahana. As Vikata, he has a peacock with him and the Sesha (divine serpent) is present with him in his avatar of Vighnaraja. Jain philosophy also shows Ganesha with a mouse, elephant, tortoise, ram or peacock.

According to some philosophers, the mooshika appeared as Ganesha's vehicle in India, somewhere around the 7th Century. The earliest mention of the mooshika is in the Matsya Purana, the Brahmananda Purana and then the Ganesha Purana. There is also mention of the Lord using an image of the mouse on His flag. The names, Mooshikavahana (mounted on a mouse) and Akhuketana (mouse flag) appear in the Ganesha Sahasranama.



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**LORD GANESHA  
WITH SHESH NAGA**



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**LORD GANESHA WITH PEACOCK**



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**LORD GANESHA MOUNTED  
ON MOUSE**

### **Philosophical connotation of the mooshika**

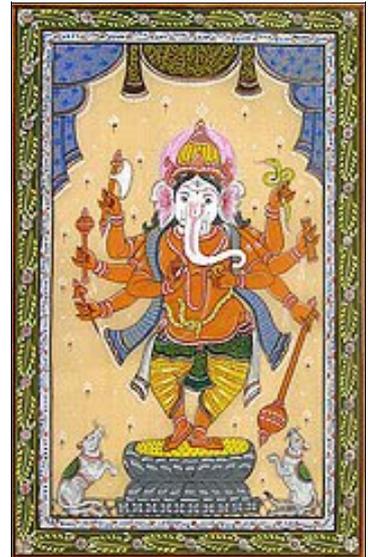
The term 'Mushika' is derived from the Sanskrit root, 'mush', which means, 'to steal'. The rat is generally a destructive creature if not controlled. It robs people of crops and food. In other words, this is a destructive pest that causes a lot of trouble.

In philosophical terms, the human mind tends to be wavering, selfish and full of desires. Many of us do not hesitate to achieve our goals even if it means hurting someone. The mooshika here is the vighna or obstacles created by our own negative mindset and thought patterns.

Additionally, our thoughts multiply multifold when left uncontrolled. Like mice attacking in the night, they stealthily attack us in the darkness of our ignorance. Ganesh seated on the mouse signifies His crushing our negative thoughts when we surrender our lives to Him.

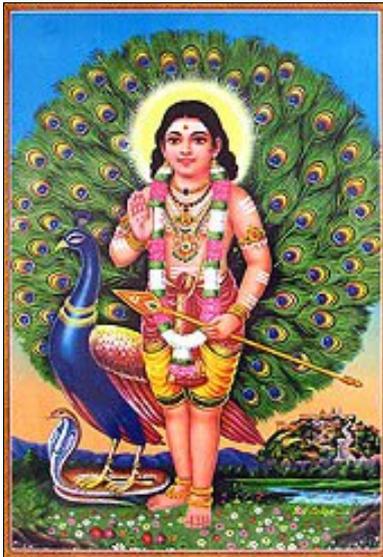
Our minds are extremely fickle and tend to run around here and there, completely leaving our control on it! Achieving control is a sign of great wisdom. The mouse at Ganesh's feet signifies that He can bring our minds under his control and bestow grace and plentitude on us. Bowing to the Vighneswara's also allows us to gain control over our minds, thereby, getting beyond our vighnas as well! The mooshika, staying at the Lord's feet permanently, signifies the steady mind forever being in prayerful attitude, leaving aside all negativity and ultimately attaining bliss and oneness with Him.

The Mushika also signifies adundance. In symbolic terms, the mouse carries Lord Ganesh's immense grace wherever he goes, including the hearts and minds of the devotees in which He resides.



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**LORD GANESHA  
WITH MOOSHIKA**

## The Peacock – Lord Muruga’s Mount



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**LORD KARTIKEYA**

Lord Muruga or Subrahmanya as he is referred to is a very popular Hindu Tamil deity and is worshipped all over Tamil Nadu, Malaysia, Sri Lanka. This deity, the son of Shiva and Parvati, is mostly popular in south India and does not have quite so much of an impact in other parts of India. He is also known by the names Saravana, Senthil, Arumuga, Kumara, Shanmukha, Guha, Skanda, Swaminatha, Vadivel and so on. According to the Tiruppugh (hymns in praise of the Lord), “He never hesitates to come to the rescue of true devotees in distress.”

The Atharva Veda depicts Muruga as ‘Agnibhuh’ or the son of Agni, the fire God. Versions of the Purana, though, generally agree that he is the son of Shiva/Rudra. The main significance of the deity is His teaching of the relevance of ‘Aum’ or the Pranava Mantra (primordial sound) to his own father, Shiva.

## How Kartikeya’s mount came to be

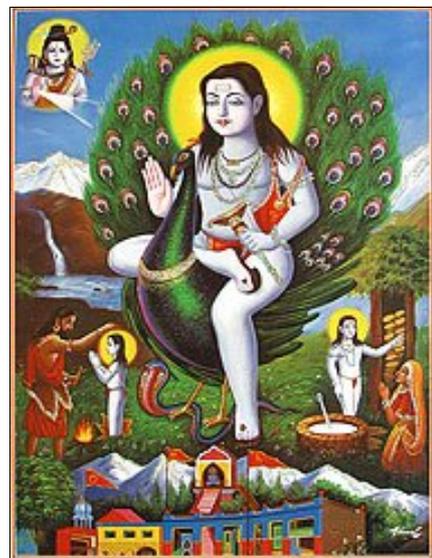
Kartikeya is known to be the protector of good, hence he carries a Vel or the divine spear. His mount is the beautiful national bird of India, the Peacock. He destroyed the terrible asura (demon) Surapadman by hurling the spear at him. The asura was split into two parts, one of which became His mount, and the other, His rooster banner.

## The Fruit of Knowledge

There is an interesting story relating to both Velayudha (Muruga) and his mount. One day, Shiva and Parvati decided to conduct a competition between their sons, Ganesha and Muruga. They asked them to go round the world three times on their respective mounts and declared that the winner would get to have the unique Jnana Pazham (the Fruit of Knowledge). Ganesha mounted his vahana, the Rat and Kartikeya proudly sped off on his own vehicle, the peacock.

It was then that Ganesha, being the wiser one, realized merely had to go round his parents three times, and that would be equivalent to going around the world three times. He finished the three rounds quickly enough and got hold of the precious fruit. Kartikeya came back flying on the peacock, confident that he would finish much faster than his brother who would have to travel on a little rat! He was absolutely disappointed and angry when he learnt what had transpired in his absence and, renouncing the world, went off in a huff to Palani, where there stands a sacred temple today.

There are many temples of Muruga all over south India, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. Even

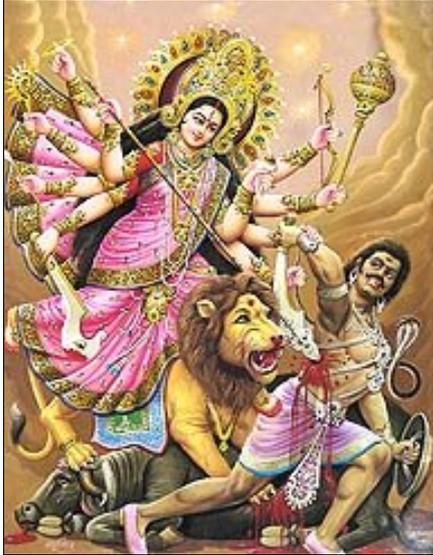


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**STORIES OF  
LORD KARTIKEYA**

Buddhists and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka venerate this deity. The Sinhalese refer to him as Kathirkamam. Lord Muruga is usually shown seated on his peacock, its brilliant plume spread out fully, with his two wives, Valli and Devayani seated by him on either side.

### The Tiger – Devi Durga’s vahana



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**GODDESS DURGA**

In Hinduism, Devi Durga is the supreme Warrior Goddess, the complete embodiment of Shakti (creative cosmic energy) and the Mother of all the beings in this world and beyond. She is the wife of Lord Shiva and the mother of Ganesha and Kartikeya. Durga is depicted with ten arms, each holding a weapon, riding a lion or tiger. Though an aspect of Parvati Herself, Durga is considered fiercer and much more powerful than the calm and serene Parvati.

Durga is said to be extremely beautiful and radiant, her form filled with stunningly brilliant aura. She manifested in order to kill the most terrible demon, Mahishasura. Each God gives Her their weapon in order to enhance Her strength and powers. Shiva gives Her His trident; Vishnu, his discus; Indra, his thunderbolt, Brahma, the kamandalu; Kubera, his mace and so on.

### The story of Parvati

Parvati, who was King Daksha’s daughter, Sati, in her previous birth, killed herself by jumping into the sacrificial fire at her father’s Yagna (fire sacrifice). Her father disapproved of Shiva and insulted both her and her husband when she arrived at the Yagna. Feeling hurt and humiliated, she immediately jumped into the sacred fire and ended her life.

Shiva was furious when he came to know of it, took her body away and took penance in a deep, cold cave in the Himalayas. Later, Sati took birth as Parvati, Mount Himavan’s daughter and, after severe penance, finally wedded Shiva and lived with him yet again.



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**PARVATI PINES AND PRAYS  
FOR LORD SHIVA**

### Durga’s mount, the lion

Being mount Himavan’s child, Himalaya gifts her a ferocious white lion. Seated on her vahana, the lion, She proceeds to attack Mahishasura, the half-buffalo, half-human asura, who had got a boon that no God, man or animal could ever kill him. Drunk with his power, he ruled the earth and the heavens and tortured and tormented both the Devas and the Suras (earthlings). Not able to defend themselves, the hapless Devas approached Parvati, who readily decided to help. Since no man could vanquish the demon, only a woman could and that is how Durga came into being.

Devi Durga undertook a severe penance before she came face to face with the asura. On the beginning of the 9th day of the waxing moon, the demons Chanda and Munda came to fight Her. The Devi turned blue with rage and the Goddess Chamunda sprang forth from Her third eye. This powerful entity killed the demons with Her sword.

Finally on the 10th day of waging a terrible battle against Mahisha, She finally vanquishes him. Her powerful lion climbs on top of the asura, paralysing him completely, digging its sharp fangs into him. The Devi then kills him with Her trident. This day of victory is marked by the Vijaya Dashami, the tenth and final day of the major Hindu festival Navratri.

The Durga Puja is held with much religious fervor by people from West Bengal. This is celebrated in a big way, erecting gigantic pandals, installing impressive, larger-than-life Durga idols and organising several bhajan (prayer group), music, dance and other entertainment programs.



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#### **SANTOSHI MATA ON TIGER**

Durga is revered as the most powerful among Goddesses, all over the length and breadth of India. She is always shown with the lion or tiger by her side. As Santoshi Mata, she appears standing along with her tiger. She is sometimes also worshipped in Her peaceful attitude, rightly referred to as Shanta Durga.

The lion or the tiger's presence as Parvati's vahana reflects her own ferocity and aggression at the time of battle with asuras such as Chanda, Munda and Mahisha. At the same time, one sees Devi Santoshi Mata as a smiling, benevolent figure, standing by her vahana, the tiger. This indicates how she keeps undue aggression and arrogance under her control, without allowing it to become her own true nature.

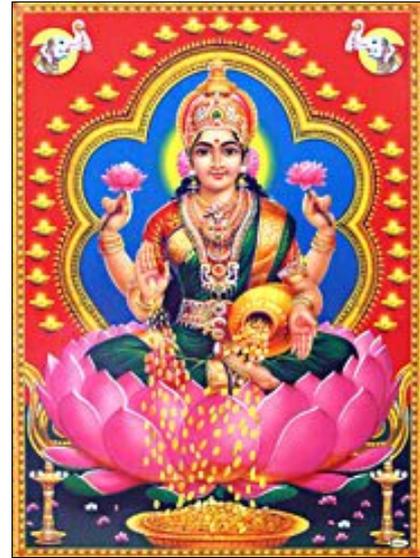
#### **The Owl – Vahana of Lashmi**

Devi Lakshmi or Mahalakshmi, the daughter of Bhrigu and Khyati, is the consort of Sri Mahavishnu and one of the Holy Trinity of Goddesses. The Hindu Goddess of prosperity and wealth, Shri, as she is also known, can be found in Buddhism and Jainism.

The name Lakshmi is derived from the Sanskrit root, 'laksh', which means observation, perception or concentration, also aiming towards a certain objective or goal. In one life, She emerged from the Milky Ocean during Samudra Manthan, and went on later to wed Vishnu. Her name, 'Shri', also stands for auspiciousness. Married women in India are addressed by the title 'Shrimati'.

Lakshmi also embodies purity, riches, beauty, good fortune, grace, charm, lustre and splendor. In other words, she is the Goddess of Plenty. She is pictured as a stunningly beautiful lady with four hands, sitting on a full-bloomed lotus, holding lotus buds in her two hands, a pot of gold with her third, her right hand holding the 'abhaya' hasta (offering succor and fearlessness to her devotees). She is dressed in silk attire and wears a lot of rich, heavy jewellery on her person, indicating her power as the Goddess of Wealth.

Two elephants flank her on either side, spraying water. This signifies that adhering to dharma at all costs, in accordance with the laws of purity and wisdom, finally lead to success and prosperity in both the worldly and spiritual pursuits. Lakshmi is also known by the names, Padma, Kamala, Padmapriya, Padmamaladhara, Padmakshi, Padmamukhi, Padmasundari and Padmahasta. Yet other names are Indira, Kamalika, Lalima, Rujula, Ramaa, Manushri, Chandrika and Nandika.



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**LAKSHMI - GODDESS OF WEALTH**

### **The Ashta Lakshmi**

The Ashta Lakshmi or eight Lakshmi-s is a group of manifestations of the Goddess of Fortune. They jointly represent the eight sources of wealth. They are Aadi Lakshmi, Dhaanya Lakshmi, Dhairya Lakshmi, Gaja Lakshmi, Santaana Lakshmi, Vijaya Lakshmi, Vidyaa Lakshmi and Dhana Lakshmi.

Hindus celebrate their major festival, Diwali, by lighting little oil lamps inside and around their houses in order to welcome the Goddess of Happiness and Prosperity into their houses. It is believed that the Goddess only enters homes which are neat and clean and where her devotees are hardworking, sincere and completely devoted to her.

### **The significance of the Owl**



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**LAKSHMI WITH HER  
VAHANA - THE OWL**

The Owl, or the Ulooka in Sanskrit, is Devi Lakshmi's vahana. Though this bird appears to be the unlikeliest vehicle for the extremely lovely Goddess, there is a deep spiritual significance as to why she selected this creature as her mount.

The Ulooka is a bird that sleeps during the day and prowls through the night. This is because it can only see in the dark, and goes blind in the day. This partial blindness in the creature is actually indicative of a sadhaka's (seeker) tendency of going toward the pursuit of secular instead of spiritual wealth.

The owl, in the Bhagavad Gita, is likened to an enlightened sthita prajna (the one who remains unwavering to any situation, whether it be happy or sad). Goddess

Lakshmi is also said to be the mistress of spiritual wisdom. By keeping the owl as her vehicle, she teaches us to open our eyes to the light of the wisdom residing within us. This Karunamayi (compassionate One) Mother, hence, symbolically keeps ignorance under her control.

## The Swan – Mount of Brahma and Goddess Saraswati

### Brahma

Brahma is one of the Divine Trinity, the others being Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma is revered as the Father, the supreme Creator, who gave birth to the whole universe. Brahma is also hence referred to as Prajapati. He is a Vedic deity and husband of Saraswati, the Goddess of learning. Though He created the entire universe, He seldom interferes with events happening in Devaloka (paradise) and Bhooloka (the earth).

According to the Puranas, the four-faced, four-armed Brahma was self-born, from a lotus that grew from Vishnu's navel. His other name, hence, is Nabhija (the one arising from the nabhi or navel). Yet another version says that He was born in water (His other name is Kanja) and that he sowed a seed that became a big, golden egg that is the universe as we know it (Hiranyagarbha).



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**BRAHMA EMERGING FROM  
THE NAVEL OF VISHNU**

Brahma, the Lord of Sacrifices, is said to constantly recite the four Vedas with his four faces. He holds the Vedas in one hand, the others holding a scepter, water-pot and a rosary of rudraksha beads.

In Hinduism, however, there are not many temples of Brahma. The most famous is the one in Pushkar, Rajasthan. There are some others such as the Kheteshwar Brahmamdhm Tirtha in Asotra village, Barmer district, Rajasthan, Brahma-Karmali village in Goa, in Khedbrahma in Gujarat and in Khokhan village in the Kullu Valley. A six-foot tall idol of Brahma has now been discovered at Sopara, near Mumbai (Bombay).

## Why Brahma chose the Swan as His vahana



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**BRAHMA FLYING -  
MOUNTED ON THE SWAN**

The Swan has an important place in Hindu mythology. This creature is said to have the Neera-Ksheera Viveka, an amazing power to separate the water from the milk, when both are combined together. In philosophical terms, this implies the power of discrimination between good and evil, and to throw away that which is bad and worthless in terms of spiritual growth.

This also implies the power to dispense justice to all creatures, irrespective of how complicated the situation might be.

The concept of Brahma or Brahman exists in Buddhism too, as Brahmavihara. This religion accepts the existence of one supreme almighty, the Infinite One, the Brahman.

## Saraswati

Saraswati in Hinduism is one of the most important deities. She is the Goddess of Learning, knowledge and also of music and the arts. She is the Divine Consort of Brahma and is one of the Tridevi-s (Maha Saraswati), the Trinity of Goddesses, the others being Maha Lakshmi and Maha Kali. Saraswati's children are the four Vedas, the most sacred texts in Hinduism.

Saraswati is seen sitting on a lotus, clothed in brilliant white, holding the national musical instrument of India, the Veena, in two hands. She holds a book in one of the other hands (signifying knowledge) and a garland of crystals in the fourth hand. Alternatively, the four arms also symbolize her complete grasp on the four Vedas.

Saraswati is likened to the huge river by the same name – as one whose creativity and purity flowed effortlessly from her being. That may be the reason why she is often depicted as sitting near a huge body of flowing water. The deity symbolizes prosperity, fertility and virtue. She also embodies purity and creativity, especially in the fields of literature and poetry. Saraswati's image has been immortalized through the paintings of some very great artists, the most famous being Raja Ravi Varma, whose painting will never be forgotten for ages to come.



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**GODDESS SARASWATI**

## Why Saraswati chose the Hamsa (Swan) and Peacock



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### SARASWATI WITH THE SWAN AND THE PEACOCK

Devi Saraswati chose the Hamsa or Swan as her mount, symbolizing her experience of the Highest Reality and Knowledge. The Swan's white color again depicts her own purity and realization of the true knowledge and true state of Brahman.

Her swan is always shown seated by her feet. Hence she is called 'Hamsa-vahini', the one who rides the swan.

A peacock is sometimes also pictured seated near Saraswati. The peacock signifies arrogance over one's beauty. By mounting a peacock, Saraswati teaches us to let go of our thoughts of external appearance and focus instead, on discovering the eternal truth.

The ninth day of the Navratri festival is celebrated as the Saraswati Puja day in many parts of India, especially in south India. On this day, nothing new is learnt and one keeps all one's books and other literature in the Puja, as a gesture of surrender to Vidya, the Goddess of Learning.

## The Seven Horses – Surya's vahanas

In Hinduism, the Surya Devata is the Sun God, the main solar deity, the giver of light. Surya, one of the 12 Adityas, is the son of Kasyapa and the husband of Chaaya Devi. He is depicted with hair and arms of gold and moves through the heavens in his triumphal golden chariot driven by seven horses. Some versions talk of just one horse with seven heads.

One version says that Lord Surya is a conglomeration of the powers of the Divine Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara. The Surya Graha represents the Ravi-Vaar or Sunday.

In Vedic astrology, the Surya Devata is even regarded as ever-so-slightly malefic, as he is always hot and dry and even hostile at times. The Sun God represents the soul, willpower, fame, health and vitality, valour, royalty, majesty and authority.

Surya is given a lot of importance in Indian culture as he is a God that can be seen everyday. Even Shaivites and Vaishnavites regard him as an aspect of Shiva and Vishnu respectively. Vaishnavites regard Surya Narayana as an aspect of Vishnu, while Shaivites consider him to be Astamurti, one of the eight forms of Shiva.

Surya's other names are Ravi, Pusha, Viswakarma, Vivaswat, Aditya, Arka, Savita, Mitra and Grahapati. Devotees chant the Aditya Hridayam in praise of Surya.



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### SURYA - THE SUN GOD

## The number seven

The number seven has great significance in Indian philosophy. There are seven colors in the rainbow, seven seas, seven notes in music, seven chakras (spiritual centers in the subtle body or sukshma sharira) and seven rishis (sapta rishi).

## What the seven horses represent



**LORD SURYA ON THE SEVEN HORSE CHARIOT, WITH DAWN AS HIS CHARIOTEER**  
(Courtesy: [Exotic India](#))

Horses portray power, arrogance and speed. We are always in awe when we sight an impressive-looking steed racing away to his destination.

The Sun God's seven horses represent the seven sins and his control over the same indicates the Devata's perfect control over the same. It also represents the way we need to control our base emotions so as to climb further and higher in the spiritual realm of our own lives.

Surya's seven horses also represent the seven chakras in the chakras or spiritual centers in our subtle body, the blossoming of which leads to the rising of the power of Kundalini or the serpentine energy residing within us.

## The Elephant Airavata – vahana of Indra

Indra is the King of the Devas in Hindu mythology, also the God of War and Weather. He is said to reside in Indraloka and is mentioned as the chief deity in the Rig Veda (one of the four sacred texts of Hinduism). Indra is often portrayed as heroic, aggressive – even arrogant, and of an amorous character. In spite of stories, many of which speak of his negative aspects, Indra always enjoys an important position in Hindu mythology, right through the pre-Vedic, Vedic and Puranic times. Weilding the powerful weapon, Vajra (thunderbolt), sometimes even a net, hook and bow, he is also said to enjoy the Soma (divine drink especially meant for those residing in Devaloka).

Hinduism now concentrates on the Trinity, but Indra is still worshipped in Pali, where he is referred to as Sakka. Indra is also worshipped by different names in Malaysia (Indera), Thailand (Phra-Intra) and Japan (Taishakuten).

The Rig Veda talks very highly of Indra, referring to him as Sakra, the mightiest of them all. Brihad-Aranyaka refers to him as the master of eight Vasus, eleven Rudras and twelve Adityas or suns. Being the lord of the Vasus also gives Indra his name of Vasava. He also came to be known as Devendra, Manavendra and Raghavendra in many more ensuing yugas (epochs).

Indra's main functions include maintaining all the elements such as Agni (fire), Varuna (water) and Surya (sun) and also to wage war against Asuras and other miscreants, thereby establishing dharma (righteousness) in all the three lokas (worlds), namely, the Swargaloka (heaven), Bhooloka or Mrityuloka (earth) and Patala (the netherworld). Though depicted as

very brave and heroic, Indra is also given very human shades of character, thus making him vulnerable some base and mundane emotions.

### **The Airavata – Indra’s Elephant**

Airavata, a huge, four-tusked white elephant is Indra’s vehicle. His tusks resembled a sacred mountain. He is also sometimes portrayed with seven trunks. Airavata manifested during the Samudra Manthan episode, while the Milky Ocean was being churned by the Devas and the Asuras. It is interesting to note here that elephants are vehicles for all the guardian deities presiding over and protecting the eight directions. Airavata stands just outside the gates of Swarga (or Paradise).

Born to Airavati, the elephant Airavata is pure and spotless white in color and was deemed the King of Elephants by Prithu, in the Vishnu Purana. The Matangalila relates that Airavata was created right in the beginning of life itself. When Brahma created the huge golden egg and sang sacred hymns, Garuda hatched, breaking the egg into two halves. This was followed by the birth of seven male and eight female elephants.



**INDRA ON HIS MOUNT -  
AIRAVATA THE ELEPHANT**  
(Courtesy: [Exotic India](#))

### **Airavata and the rain**

There is a popular myth which believes that elephants are capable of giving rise to clouds. One of Airavata’s names means “one who binds or knits clouds”. There is yet another story linking Airavata with clouds and rain. Indra rides on Airavata to defeat the demon Vritra. After having routed the demon, Indra proceeds back to Swargaloka on his mount. The huge elephant then reaches down with his trunk to pull out water from the netherworld and then sprays it generously on the clouds, thereby resulting in cool water (or rain) arising from the clouds.

Hence Airavata is also called Abhranu or Abhra-Matanga. Additionally, he is also referred to as Naga-Malla (fighter elephant) and Arkasodara (brother of Surya, the Sun God). Airavata guards the east, the direction which is protected by lord Indra.

### **Temples of Airavata**

In a Darasuram temple, near Tanjore district, Tamil Nadu, is a Shivalinga, which Airavata is said to worshipped. This Linga is now referred to as Airavateshwara. This is also a world heritage monument today.

In Thailand, Erawan is the name given to Airavata. He is shown with 33 heads and more than two tusks. Some idols also show Indra riding Erawan.

In the now defunct Kingdom of Laos, Erawas was shown as a three-headed elephant, featuring in their Royal Flag.

## The Ram – Agni Devata's mount



**AGNI - THE GOD OF FIRE -  
MOUNTED ON THE RAM**  
(Courtesy: [Exotic India](#))

Lord Agni, or the Lord of Fire, holds the second most important position in Hindu mythology, after Indra. Born from a lotus created by lord Brahma, he is depicted as being young, vibrant and energetic. He is often shown as red-hued, short, pot-bellied with three legs, seven tongues, seven arms and two faces. The two faces signify both the creative and destructive properties of fire. Seven rays of brilliant light spring forth from Agni's person and he is known to be the guardian of the southeast direction. Being a dhoomaketu, Agni has an image of smoke on his banner.

The very first verse and also the mandalas (or divisions) of the Rig Veda starts with a hymn to Agni. Hindu mythology holds Agni in an exalted position. The Upanishads talk about him as the supreme Lord, the Atman and the Eternal Flame - the soul of the Universe. Agni is the chosen Priest, God, Lord of Sacrifices, Guardian of Law, witness of the whole world and the One that dispels darkness within and without.

The three-faced rudraksha bead is the main symbol of this Devata. Wearing this bead cleanses the person, just like the fire that burns and annihilates all impurities. This Devata is the central character in yagnas and yagas (sacrificial rituals) and is part and parcel of all major Hindu rituals. It is believed that offering sacrifices burnt through the sacrificial fire reaches directly to the Gods. Even today, Agni is an integral part of wedding ceremonies and the like.

Fire worship has existed and still exists in every culture of the world as well. While Christians light candles, God was worshipped as fire in ancient Israel. Especially in the Hindu context, Agni continues and will continue to embody all that is mystical, vibrant and divine!

## The Ram

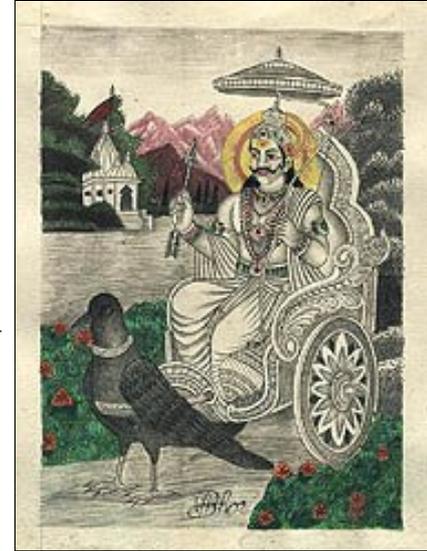
Agni is shown as riding the Ram and rarely, a chariot pulled by goats. Some versions also talk about Agni riding a chariot pulled by horses. The Ram signifies power, strength and vitality. The vibrancy of Agni is also reflected in the vehicle he chose for himself, the ram.

## The Crow – Shani Graha's vahana

Shani Devata is one of the Navagrahas, the nine primary celestial beings ruling their respective planets. The Lord of Saturn, he is also the Lord of Saturday. He is also referred to as Shanaischarya, Shaneeshwara, Shani Bhagavan and Shani Deva. He is the son of Surya Deva and Chaaya Devi and so he is also known as Chaayaputra. He is also the cousin of Yama, the God of Death.

Shani is depicted as being dark-complexioned. He is mostly shown mounted on a crow, though sometimes also on a raven or vulture.

Though a much-feared God, he is also known to bestow a lot of good on his devotees. Shani creates great difficulties for the seeker, with an intention of leading him on the path to spirituality and, eventually, enlightenment. Shani Devata embodies patience, endeavor and endurance.



**SHANI WITH HIS  
VAHANA - THE CROW**  
(Courtesy: [Exotic India](#))

Shani's metal is iron and his gemstone is the Blue Sapphire. He is the Lord of the West and also the Ruler of Seasons. Perhaps because of his dark and fearsome nature, he is linked to dark things that are ugly and quite useless.

Lord Hanuman, it is believed, is the only panacea for Shani's unfavorable presence in one's life, as Hanuman was the only one Shani could not even lay a finger on! The former's immense bhakti (devotion) of Lord Rama was so strong that he could even manage to save Shani from the clutches of the asura king Ravana himself!

## The significance of the Crow

Portraying Shani Bhagavan with the crow, vulture or raven as his vehicle is symbolic of his own fearful appearance. It also represents the Planet God repressing thieving or negative tendencies. Further, it shows us how Shani's benevolent influence can even change the wicked creature into something hopeful and useful.

## The Water Buffalo – Yama's vahana



**YAMA -  
THE GOD OF DEATH**  
(Courtesy: [Exotic India](#))

Yama, son of Vivasvat and Saranya and husband of Shyamala, is the God of Death in Hinduism. His name first came up in the Vedas. Yama is sometimes said to be the first mortal that died in Mrityuloka, ascended to the other world and found out ways and means by which to enter Swargaloka. By virtue of his being the pioneer, he was awarded the position of the Ruler of the Dead.

He lives in a dark and gloomy palace called Kalichi, situated in the far reaches of Patala of the netherworld. He is the ruler of the Southern direction. His face is scary and grisly, reflecting all the pain, suffering and diseases affecting creatures all round the world.

Yama, which also means 'twins', is said to have a twin sister, Yami. Assisted by Chitragupta, Yama keeps records of each living creature on earth and, upon the end of their life term in Bhooloka, look into their respective Karma-s and decide whether they should be sent to Heaven (Swarga) or Hell (Naraka). Hence Yama is referred to as Dharma, the Lord of Justice. He is one of the wisest of Devatas and can be loosely compared to Hades or Pluto, the Greek deities of the underworld.

Yama is depicted with green or red skin, red attire, riding a water buffalo, holding a mace in his right hand, with which he strikes down his victims. In his left hand, he holds a rope which he uses to pull out the soul from the corpse. He is the Guardian of Directions and reports to Vishnu (the One who maintains the universe) and Shiva (the One who destroys it). He is also known by the names Dharmaraja, Mrityu, Antaka, Kaala, Vaivasvata and Sarvapranahara.

## The Water Buffalo

The tough, strong and resilient mount of Yama, the water buffalo, is said to have had the grit enough to carry two fully armored Gods on its back. Some rare portraits of Yama show him seated on his mount with his consort, Shyamala.

The water buffalo signifies strength and commitment to the purpose of upholding justice and dharma or righteousness.

Yama ascends his mount and travels around the whole world in search of those whose lifeterm on Bhooloka has ended, so as to take them back to where they came from, thereby bringing the process of life and death to a full circle!

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This article was written by **Saipriya Viswanathan**. Saipriya is a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Carnatic vocal music and Carnatic Veena. She is a recipient of several awards for both dance and music, including the Sur Mani and Singar Mani titles. She is a recipient Govt. of India Merit Scholarship for dance and is a diploma holder in Carnatic vocal music.

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