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Surya - The Sun God in Hindu Mythology

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"Om aa krishnen rajasa vartamaano niveshyannamritam matrayam cha.
Hiranyayena savita rathena devo yati bhuvnaani pashyann"



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SUN GOD

The above is the Vedic mantra or hymn, found in the Rig Veda. This is in praise of Surya, the Sun God in Hindu mythology. Surya Deva, also known as Suraya or Phra Athit, is the main solar deity in Hinduism. He is also commonly referred to as the Sun.

The main deity of the Navagrahas or the Nine Planets of Hindu Astrology as well, he is also considered as one of the Navagrahas. Surya is often portrayed as riding a chariot driven by 7 horses or alternatively, by 1 horse with 7 heads. These 7 horses represent the colors of the rainbow and the 7 chakras in the subtle human body as well. Surya is sometimes shown with 2 hands, holding one lotus in each and sometimes with 4 hands, holding a lotus, Sankha (conch), Chakra (discus) and Gada (mace).

Surya Devata in Hinduism is considered to be an eye of the Virata Purusha, or the Vishwarupa (Universal Form) of Lord Sri Krishna himself. Incidentally, Surya is worshipped by people, saints and even asuras or demons. Certain groups of Rakshasas, called the Yatudhanas, were staunch followers of the Sun God.

Surya Devata is regarded as the Supreme Being



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**SUN GOD ON CHARIOT
DRAWN BY SEVEN HORSES**

among the followers of the Saura sect, which has now become very small and is almost endangered. The Sauras worship him as one of the five major forms of God.

One can find many temples, all over India, dedicated to the worship of Surya. He is worshipped in the early hours of dawn, especially on Hindu festivals such as Makar Sankranti, Ratha Saptami, Chhath and Samba Dashami.

Most Common Forms of Surya

Surya is worshipped in many forms. But two of the most common forms of the deity are Arka and Mitra.

- Surya in the form of **Arka** is worshipped mostly in North and Eastern India. The very grand and elaborate Konark Temple in Orissa, the Uttararka and Lolarka in Uttar Pradesh, the Balarka temple in Rajasthan and the Sun Temple at Modhera, Gujarat, are all dedicated to his form of Arka. Yet another temple, the Balarka Surya Mandir built in Uttar Pradesh in the 10th Century, was destroyed in the 14th Century, during the Turkish invasion.
- The other most common form of Surya, namely, **Mitra**, is found mostly in Gujarat. "Mitra" literally means "friend".

Different Names of Surya

Lord Surya is hailed by 108 names. The commonest among them are Aditya, Adideva, Angaraka, Arka, Bhaga, Brahma, Dhanwantari, Dharmadhwa, Dhatri, Dhumaketu, Indra, Jaya, Maitreya, Prabhakara, Ravi, Rudra, Savitri, Soma, Teja, Vaisravana, Vanhi, Varun and Vishnu.

Surya: Family and Relationships

Surya, or Vivasvata, had 3 queens, namely, Sharanya (also called Saraniya, Saranyu, Sanjana or Sangya), Ragyi and Prabha. Sharanya was the mother of Vaivasvata Manu (or Satyavrata, the present Manu) and the twins Yama (the God of Death) and his sister Yami. Later, she also gave birth to the Ashvin twins, who were the divine horsemen and physicians to the Devas.



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SHANI DEV

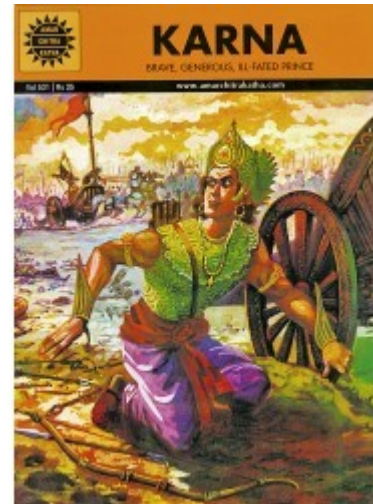
Being unable to bear the extreme radiance emitted by Surya, Sharanya created a superficial shadow of herself, called Chhaya. She asked her to act as Surya's wife. In due course of time, Chhaya gave birth to 2 sons, namely, Savarni Manu and Shani (Planet Saturn) and 2 daughters, namely, Tapti and Vishti. Surya's other wife, Ragyi, gave birth to their son, Revanta or Raivata.

Incidentally, Surya Deva's sons, Shani and Yama, are the judges of human life and karma. While Shani Deva bestows positive or negative results for one's deeds committed during one's lifetime, Yama Deva grants these results after one's death.

In the Ramayana and the Mahabharata

In the **Ramayana**, Surya is said to be the father of King Sugriva. Sugriva was the one who helped Rama defeat the terrible demon king, Ravana. He imparts training to Hanuman to help him lead the Vanara Sena or the Army of Monkeys. Interestingly, Lord Rama himself is a descendant of Surya – he is a Suryavanshi, that is, hailing from the dynasty of the Suryavanshas.

Surya bears great significance in the **Mahabharata** as well. According to this epic, Kunti receives the diksha for a mantra from the short-tempered sage, Durvasa. She was given the boon that whenever she chanted this mantra, she would be able to summon a Deva and also bear a child by him. Without realizing its seriousness, Kunti tested the mantra, summoning Surya. As Surya was forced to fulfill the obligation of the mantra, she miraculously begot a child from him, while actually retaining her virginity. Not able to bear the thought of becoming an unwed mother, princess Kunti was compelled to abandon her son, Karna, who later grew up to be one of the greatest ever warriors and a central character in the battle of Kurukshetra.



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KARNA

Incidentally, the first book of the Mahabharata does not mention Surya as one of the Adityas. However, he may be regarded as the joint strength of all the 12 solar deities, namely, Dhatri, Mitra, Aryaman, Sakra, Varuna, Amsa, Vaga, Vivaswat, Usha, Savitri, Tvashtri, Vishnu.

In Other Cultures

The Sun God enjoys great importance in Greek and Egyptian mythology. Surya's Greek counterpart is Helios and the Egyptian Sun God is Ra.

In Zoroastrianism, which is based on the worship of Fire, the Sun is described as the "Eye of Ahura Mazda". This bears resemblance to Hinduism, which considers Surya to be one eye of Sri Maha Vishnu.

In Vedic Astrology

In Vedic astrology, Surya is regarded as slightly volatile, due to his nature of being too radiant and emitting too much heat. The Sun thus represents the soul, vitality, courage, willpower, authority, royalty and so on. His position is exalted in Mesha or Aries and takes a backward position in Tula or Libra. In Hindu horoscopes, the best location for Surya is considered to be right overhead, on the 10th house and on the 1st, 5th and 9th houses.

Surya is the Lord of Kritika, Uttara Phalguni and Uttara Ashadha. He is often associated with reds, coppers and metallic colors and his gemstone is ruby.

Surya Blesses Bala Hanuman



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HANUMAN

knowledge to Hanuman.

Surya Deva is known to be strong, powerful and invincible. However, he too was once subdued by Hanuman, the greatest devotee and also the humble sevak (servant) of Lord Rama. He had an interesting episode with Surya during his childhood. A rather playful and mischievous monkey in his baalyaavastha (childhood), Hanuman leapt up to the skies and started chasing Surya, mistaking him to be a ripe mango! He kept pursuing the Sun, wanting to eat what he thought was the delicious fruit.

Later, when he realized that Surya was the all-knowing teacher, Hanuman raised his body and positioned himself to orbit around the Sun, also requesting him to accept him as a disciple. Surya refused, saying that he could never be in one place, as he had to constantly traverse around the world. An undeterred Hanuman continued to pursue Surya and kept pleading persistently. Surya then agreed and passed on his

In this way, Surya emerged as a Karma Saakshi, the Eternal Witness of all deeds. The former also gave Hanuman 2 siddhis, namely, laghima and garima, which enabled him to take the smallest form and the largest form, respectively, at will.

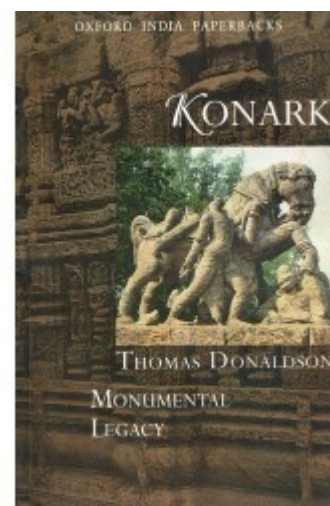
Sun Temples in India

One can find several temples in India, dedicated to the worship of Surya. Here is a list of the major temples:

Konark Sun Temple, Orissa

The Konark Sun Temple is the most famous in India. Built in the 13th Century, it is also known as the Black Pagoda. It is located in Konark, Odisha and was supposedly built by King Narasimhadeva I of the Eastern Ganga Dynasty. This temple is built in the shape of a huge chariot with elaborately carved stone wheels, walls and pillars. A UNESCO World Heritage Site; also considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of India; this temple is now partially in ruins.

The name "Konark" is derived from the roots, "Kona" (corner) and "Arka". The structure was originally built at the mouth of the river Chandrabhaga, but now, the river has notably receded. Strictly adhering to the Kalinga style of architecture, this temple was built with Khondalite rocks and faced the east in such a way that the first rays of the sun could strike the main entrance. The Konark temple is well known for its intricate and erotic sculptures of maithunas.



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KONARK - MONUMENTAL LEGACY

Two smaller temples have been found nearby. One of them is the Mayadevi Temple, who is supposedly one of Surya's wives. The other one is a Vaishnava temple, comprising sculptures of Balarama, Varaha and Trivikrama. But neither of the temples has a main idol.

According to legend, Samba, the son of Krishna, suffered from leprosy. The sage Kataka asked him to worship Surya to cure his disease. Samba undertook penance for 12 years near the shores of Chandrabhaga and then built Konark and other temples as well.

Multan Sun Temple

This temple is also known as the Aditya Sun Temple and is located in modern Punjab, Pakistan. The original Multan Sun Temple is said to have been built by Samba. This temple is supposed to have been visited by Hsuen Tsang in 641 AD. The temple, rich in its opulence, gold and gems, became a great source of revenue for the Muslim invaders, post their invasion. He plundered and looted its wealth, sparing only the idol, which was made of wood. Before the invasion, this idol had been covered with gems and gold, with two red rubies for its eyes.

The city of Multan probably got its name from the Sanskrit word, "Mulasthana", which is the location of this temple. However, the exact location of the original Multan temple is presently under debate.

Biranchinarayan Temple, Buguda

Also known as the abode of Biranchinarayana or the Wooden Konark, this temple is situated in the Buguda town in Orissa. It was built immediately after the Konark temple, by King Bhanjadeva in 1790. The main deity in this temple is Biranchi Narayana, whose idol was recovered from the ruins of Maltigad. The idol shows a chariot driven by seven horses with only one wheel on the left; also with Arjuna as the charioteer.

Made of wood, this temple faces west and is built in such a way that the setting sun's last rays fall on Surya's feet.

Sun Temple, Modhera



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MODHERA SUN TEMPLE

The Sun temple in Modhera, Gujarat, was created in 1026 AD by King Bhimdev of the Solanki dynasty. This impressive stone temple is located along the banks of the river Pushpavati, about a 100 kms from Ahmedabad. Though prayers are no more conducted in this temple, it still retains its earlier grandeur. At present, it is under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India.

According to the Skanda Purana and Brahma Purana, the regions surrounding Modhera was known as Dharmaranya. On the advice of Sage Vasishtha, Lord Rama had come to this place to purify himself after killing Ravana. He stayed in a place called Modherak and performed a yagna there, after which he set up a village named Sitapur, which eventually came to be known as Modhera.

Though the Solanki dynasty lost its power during the Turkish invasion, it regained its glory in the later years. The Solankis were considered to be Gurjars or descendants of Surya. They helped bring back the region's lost glory.

The temple is so built that the first rays of the sun fell on the idol of Surya, at the time equinoxes. Now, the temple is partially in ruins. However, a dance festival is annually held, in order to keep the ancient culture and tradition alive. Renowned artists travel from all over the globe to perform at this wonderful location.

Martand Sun Temple

Situated near Anantnag in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, this Sun temple is now in ruins. It was built in the Aryan style in the 8th Century and is now one of the most important archaeological sites in India. Built by King Lalitaditya Muktapida, it is said that the foundation of the temple was built around 370-500 AD.

Now, the Martand temple appears in the list of India's centrally protected monuments.

Suryanar Temple

The Suryanar Temple is situated in Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu. This temple was built even before the Konark temple, by Kulottunga Choladeva. comprising a 50-foot Gopuram or tower, there is an idol of the Surya with his chariot and horses, right at the entrance. The central sanctum sanctorum is dedicated to Surya, with shrines of the other planets situated all around it. This Navagraha temple is considered to be extremely powerful and attracts a large number of devotees every year, especially during festival times. Earlier, this temple was also known as Kulottungachola-Marttandalaya.

Festivals

Many festivals are dedicated to Lord Surya. The major festivals are as follows:

- **Makar Sankranti** is the most popular, also the most widely celebrated festival, dedicated to Surya Deva. Referred to as Pongal by Tamil people residing all over the world, this event is to show gratitude to the Deva for bestowing a good harvest. Here, the first grain is dedicated to him.
- **Chhath** is yet another Hindu festival celebrated in Surya's name. Said to have been started by Karna, the son of Surya, it is held in Bihar, Jharkhand and certain regions in Uttar Pradesh, Nepal and even Mauritius.
- **Samba Dashami** is a Surya-related festival celebrated in the eastern Indian state of Orissa. This is held in honor of Samba, the son of Krishna.
- **Ratha Saptami** is another major Hindu festival dedicated to Surya. This falls on the seventh day of the bright half of the Hindu month of Magha. This day is also celebrated as Surya Jayanti, as it is believed that Lord Vishnu incarnated as Surya on this day. Rathasaptami starts with the purification bath, followed by an elaborate pooja and other rituals, seeking the benevolence and grace of Lord Surya. At the Tirumala temple in Andhra Pradesh, the presiding deity, Lord Balaji (Venkateshwara) is mounted on seven Vahanas (vehicles), one after another, in the prescribed order. The Lord is mounted on the Suryaprabha Vahana, Hanmad Vahana, Garuda Vahana, Peddasesha Vahana, Kalpavruksha Vahana, Sarvabhupahala Vahana and finally, the Chandraprabha Vahana. This is referred to as the Okka roju Brahmostavam, or a single day celebration, wherein the devotee gets the darshan of the Lord being carried by his different vahanas. The Lord, along with his consorts, Sridevi and Bhudevi, are taken on a procession on the Thiru mada streets around the temple.



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BALAJI - LORD VENKATESHWARA

Elaborate prayers are offered to Surya on this day, including the Adityahridayam, Gayathri Suryashtakam, Surya Sahasranamam and so on. Many Hindu temples conduct a ceremonial procession of Surya at this time. In South India, rangolis are

drawn on the ground with colored powder, often depicting a chariot driven by 7 horses.

Surya Namaskara or the "Sun Salutation"

Many devout Hindus regularly perform the Surya Namaskara, literally meaning, "Sun salutation". This mode of worship is essentially made up of 11 asanas or yogic postures, which are assumed in successive movements, along with breath control, to form a flowing series of one complete namaskara. 12 mantras are chanted for each of these namaskaras. The Surya Namaskara is not only considered auspicious, but is also very beneficial for all-round health and wellness, both physical and mental.

Suryopasana or Sun Worship

Many Hindus perform regular Suryopasana, that is, offering worship to the Sun God. The period from April 12th to 23rd is considered most auspicious for the worship of Surya. Surya is believed to be the giver of intelligence, confidence, good health, courage, strength, leadership qualities, independence, fame, success, power and much more. While an ill-placed position of the Sun in a person's horoscope could indicate low self-esteem, lack of confidence, ill health and dependency; an overly strong placement of the Sun could also trigger many negative qualities in the person concerned.

After having a bath early morning, the seeker has to offer jal or water to Surya, looking in his direction, paying salutations to the Lord. Surya is regarded as a manifestation of the Brahman and so he is often referred to as Surya Narayana.

One can chant the Vedic mantra of Surya, which is mentioned right at the very beginning of this article.

The puranic mantra of Surya is as follows:

*"Japa Kusuma Sankasham Kashyapeyam Mahadyuthim
Thamognam Sarvapapagnam Pranathosmi Divakaram"*

- Surya's Beeja mantra is "Om hran hrin hron sah suryay namah"
- The mantra, "Om ghrini suryaya nama:", is commonly used as well.

Adityahridayam

Adityahridayam is a sloka or hymn in praise of Aditya, the Sun God. It was originally recited by Sage Agastya to Rama on the battlefield, before the latter went to fight the demon king, Ravana. Belonging to the Yuddha Kanda of the Ramayana, this hymn starts at the beginning of the Rama-Ravana duel. Rama was exhausted after a long day's fight with the army of Lanka and so, Agastya taught him the mantra in order to gain the courage and strength to face the enemy. The hymn was later compiled by Sage Valmiki.

The Adityahridayam comprises a total of 30 slokas, which contain the whole episode of Agastya telling Rama about the greatness of Lord Surya; relating the benefits of reciting the hymn; the sloka itself; and how the Lord pervades the Consciousness and is actually one with the jeevatma.

The Adityas

The word "Aditya" in Sanskrit refers to something "that comes from Aditi". In other words, it refers to "the offspring of Aditi". Aditya also means the Sun.

In the Rigveda

According to the Rigveda, the Adityas are the 7 sons of Aditi. These celestial beings are Varuna, Mitra (or Surya), Aryaman, Bhaga, Amsa, Dhatri and Indra. Aditi had an eighth Aditya as well, called Martanda, who she rejected and disowned.

The Yajurveda records the existence of 8 Adityas, the last one being, Vivasvan. Some believe that this entity was actually Martanda, who was revived and then became Vivasvan.

The Rigveda describes the Adityas as akin to pure streams of water, free from all guile, falsehood and negativity. They have also been attributed as being completely Dharmic or righteous. They are benevolent divine beings, who protect all beings and also guard the world of the spirits.

In Other Texts

- The **Brahmanas**, which are commentaries on the 4 Vedas, list the existence of 12 Adityas, as Amsa, Aryaman, Bhaga, Daksha, Dhatri, Indra, Mitra, Ravi, Savitr, Arka (or Surya), Varuna and Yama.
- The **Linga Purana** too talks about 12 Adityas, namely, Vishnu, Indra, Dhata, Bhaga, Twashta, Amshuman, Varuna, Mitra, Vivasvan, Pusha, Savitr and Aryaman.
- In the **Chandogya-Upanishad**, Aditya is another name of Vishnu, in his fifth avatara as Vamana, the Dwarf. Interestingly, Vamana's mother, according to this Purana, is Aditi.
- One other list from the **Vishnu Purana** names 12 Adityas, as Amsa, Aryaman, Bhaga, Dhuti, Mitra, Pusan, Sakra, Savitr, Tvastri, Varuna, Vishnu and Vivasvat.

This article was written by **Priya Viswanathan**, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>).

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