

Exploring Indian Mythology



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The Creation of the Universe

At first there was nothing but a monstrously huge, dark sea that seemed to stretch away forever in all directions. Brahman, the single, all-powerful deity composed of spirit rather than flesh, floated leisurely just above the water's surface. He drifted there, always deep in thought, for a thousand years (or what to him was a mere instant) until the idea of creating a universe to surround the sea came to him. He had fashioned that great expanse of water by willing it into existence long before. But by itself, he felt, it had seemed incomplete.

To create an entire universe, Brahman realized, would take some hard work. And for that, he felt he would do better in corporeal, or flesh-and-blood, form. To that end, he willed a special seed into existence and watched it sink silently beneath the waves. Seconds later, he no longer floated above the vast sea. Instead, he now resided within the submerged seed, which steadily transformed into a magnificent glowing egg. In time (how long no one knows), the egg rose to the surface and split open, revealing a large, luxurious lotus blossom.

Lying within the flower's folds, fast asleep, was the creator god Brahma. According to later Hindu myth tellers, this avatar, or manifestation, of the universal spirit Brahman had four

corporeal

Composed of flesh and blood, or having a body



Brahma, the four-headed god of creation, produces a seed that blossoms into a luxurious lotus flower to help him bring the universe to life.

heads. And from time to time each of them recited one of the four Vedas, the oldest of Hinduism's sacred texts. Brahma also had red skin and four arms. One of his hands held a book of prayers from the Vedas; a second hand held a spoon or flower; a third a pot of water; and the fourth a string of prayer beads. In addition, he moved along the surface of the giant lotus's leaves atop a handsome white swan, his *vahana*. Each of the Hindu gods who would subsequently be created was destined to ride on his or her own such animal.

Fashioning the Four Worlds

The creator deity felt as if he had awakened from a long sleep. He yawned, rubbed his eyes, stretched, and glanced around at his surroundings. At first it appeared as though he was alone,

hovering there above the surface of the seemingly limitless sea. But soon he caught sight of an unidentified object floating toward him on the water's surface.

Finally, the object came close enough for Brahma to see that it was a huge serpent whose body was twisted into several coils nested within one another. Moreover, huddled inside those coils was the divinity Vishnu. Another incarnation of the universal spirit, he bore a muscular body that shone with a radiant blue hue. He, too, possessed four arms, and his hands held, in succession, a



Atop the splendid eagle Garuda, Vishnu holds a mace, a lotus flower, a conch shell, and a discus in his four hands.

vahana

In ancient Indian lore,
a creature ridden by a
god

mace (club), a lotus flower, a conch shell, and a discus. Although sleeping, the blue being was mounted atop his vahana, the splendid eagle Garuda.

Assuming that Vishnu needed his rest, Brahma politely refrained from waking him. But suddenly came a loud noise—a mysterious humming sound that echoed across the sea’s surface. It became so intense that it awakened the sleeping god. As he opened his eyes, a bright flash of light illuminated the dark ocean and sky. Brahma looked outward and saw that a brilliant glowing disk—the sun—now hung on the distant horizon. Clearly, the first dawn of a new age had arrived.

Vishnu’s instantaneous formation of the sun to light the new world is a reminder that Hindu mythology contains numerous alternate creation stories. In some of these stories, Vishnu, rather than Brahma, is the primary creator. In one of those myths, the blue deity initially took the form of a giant boar. Reaching into his navel, he extracted a lotus blossom from which Brahma soon emerged. Then, with Brahma’s help, Vishnu went into a veritable frenzy of creation. According to an early Hindu holy text, the *Vishnu Purana*:

He lifted the earth up quickly and placed [it] upon the great ocean. The earth stayed like a great ship on the top of the flood of water and did not sink, because [its] body was so spread out. Then, when he had made the earth level, the [creator] . . . piled up mountains on the earth in order to divide it. By means of his power, [that great god] divided the earth into seven continents [and] he created the four worlds [earth, the atmosphere, the heavens, and the underworld].⁶

In the popular version in which Vishnu assists Brahma, the two gods fashioned the four worlds from the separate petals of Brahma’s birth lotus. One petal expanded outward and became earth’s surface, a second petal rose up to form the atmosphere, the third one sank downward and became the underworld, and

the fourth floated up beyond the atmosphere and morphed into the night sky containing the luminous stars and planets.

New Deities, Animals, and Plants Arise

Fashioning the physical structure of the universe and earth marked only the beginning of Brahma's and Vishnu's creative endeavors. Overflowing with inventive and artistic energy, they next set out to populate the world with other living things. Perhaps partly because they were incarnations of the sole god, Brahman, they decided to continue that process of making avatars. In that mindset they started making new versions of themselves, and in turn many of the divine beings they spawned created *their* own avatars.

avatar

A manifestation, incarnation, or alternate form of a living thing

In this manner, numerous new gods and goddesses arose. Among them were Agni, god of fire; Devi, god of light; Ganesha, god of wisdom; and Vayu, god of wind, whose own avatar, in some Indian traditions, was the monkey-headed Hanuman, god of strength and courage.

Similarly, Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, subsequently gave rise to her own avatar—Radha, goddess of love.

Meanwhile, even as some of the gods were begetting still more deities, Brahma and Vishnu proceeded to fashion all sorts of animals. According to the *Vishnu Purana*, for instance, Brahma “made the birds from his own youthful energy; he made sheep from his breast, goats from his mouth; [he] created cows from his stomach and his two sides. From his feet he made horses, elephants, donkeys, oxen, deer, camels, mules, antelopes, and other species. Grasses, fruits, and roots were born from the hairs of his body.”⁷

To help with making still more diverse beings and creatures, Brahma transformed his thumbs into a special assistant creator named Daksha. Depicted in later Indian art as a pot-bellied individual with a goat's head, Daksha was said to have the power to make himself extremely small. In this state he created life

The Creator's Many Forms

The story of how Brahma and Vishnu, with the aid of Daksha, created the universe and the living things within it does more than tell where the world, animals, plants, and humans came from. The tale also illustrates the role of Brahman. Because he is often mentioned along with Brahma, Vishnu, Daksha, and other gods, at first glance it might seem as though Hinduism is polytheistic, meaning that its adherents worship multiple deities. Beneath the surface, however, Hinduism is actually monotheistic, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Hindus refer to the sole god who created and controls the universe not only as Brahman, but also as the *ishvara*, or “universal spirit.” Thus, all of the many divine beings in the Hindu pantheon (group of gods) are not truly separate entities. Rather, they are diverse manifestations or disguises that the *ishvara* employs in his roles of creator, guide, controller, and protector of the world and humanity. Hindus believe that all matter in the universe—both living and nonliving—is an expression of one kind or another of the *ishvara*.

forms that sprang from tiny seeds and eggs. He also gave rise to snakes and various wild animals, along with ghosts, demons, and the Gandharvas—celestial beings who were adept at singing and dancing.

Brahma, Vishnu, and Daksha were so busy with this immense round of making nonliving and living things that they gave little or no thought to the fact that these efforts were not unique. Whether they produced divine avatars, camels and elephants, or serpents and ghosts, theirs was not the first such burst of creation. Nor would it be the last. Rather, the universe they made was merely the latest version of universal creation—a single link in an endless chain of new universes.

This is because Hindus believe that time has no beginning, nor will it have an end. Instead, time, the rise of divine beings, and

their creation of the natural world are seen as cyclic and eternal. That is, in each new cycle, the gods and world come into existence, flourish for a while, and then decline and die out, thereby making way for the next cycle of creation. The length of each cycle is unknown. The general wisdom is that a single cycle lasts a few billion years. Therefore, the *Vishnu Purana* states, at the start of each cycle, “again and again Brahma performs creation of this sort, for his power is the will to create.”⁸

The Creation of Humans

Driven by that powerful determination to create, Brahma was not satisfied with bringing into existence the sky, mountains, plains, forests, animals, and plants. There was something missing, he felt. But what could it be? After pondering that problem for several minutes, he suddenly realized that what the new universe lacked was a race of intelligent mortal beings to populate that vast, diverse world. The creator deity also reasoned that such beings could potentially serve as loyal followers and worshippers of Brahma’s numerous divine manifestations.

The race of beings in question became known as humans. Brahma fashioned the first one and called him Manu. Hinduism has several different traditions that describe Manu, his adventures, and his hand in the creation of the rest of humanity. Almost certainly the most famous and popular version is the one in which one day that initial human went for a walk along the bank of the Indus River. He was surprised to hear a faint voice crying out for help. Glancing around, he spied a tiny fish flopping around in the mud, and it became clear that the creature could speak. According to the ancient Indian document the *Satapatha Brahmana*, the fish told Manu, “Care for me and I will save you.”⁹ When the man asked what he needed to be saved from, the creature explained that a huge flood was soon going to inundate the earth’s surface and that the fish could keep Manu from drowning in the disaster.

Manu believed the fish’s story and carefully cared for the creature. At first he placed it in a bucket of fresh water. Later, as the

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KEY HINDU GODS



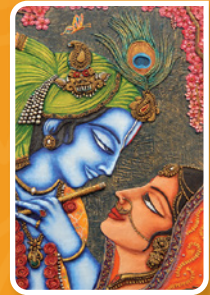
Brahman

Brahma + Saraswati



Vishnu

Vishnu + Lakshmi



Rama* + Sita

Kalki*

Krishna*

Hanuman
(Rama's Loyal Servant)

Parvati + Shiva

Manu + Shatarupa
(First Man) (First Woman)

Human Race

Ganesha



* Vishnu's avatars

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