



**Durga Puja in Bengal
an Ode to the Sacred Feminine**

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Indian mythology is rich with several stories of Devis and Devatas (Goddesses and Gods), of divine couples who work together as one, in order to fight malevolence and protect their devotees from the dark forces of evil. Today, we bring you the story of the Trimurti, or the Divine Trinity-couples of Hinduism - the tales of Brahma and Saraswati; Vishnu and Lakshmi; and Shiva and Parvati.

Together, we discover the true nature and mission of these three divine couples of Hindu mythology.



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**TRIMUTI - BRAHMA, VISHNU
AND SHIVA**



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**PARVATI, LAKSHMI AND
SARASWATI - CONSORTS OF
THE TRIMURTI DEITIES**

Brahma and Saraswati

Lord Brahma - the Prajapati, the Creator



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BRAHMA

Lord Brahma is considered the Creator of the entire world and hence, he is also referred to as the Prajapati. Brahma is infinite and is the source of space and time. Theologically, Brahma is eka akshara or made up of one letter, the AUM. He is also a swayambhu devata, the self-born God.

In philosophical terms, Brahma is the first manifestation of one's ahankara. In cosmological terms, he is the Hiranya Garbha or the golden embryo, whence came all creation. He is considered the Ball of Fire, from which developed the entire Universe. Hence, all creatures from all

the three worlds are his progeny.

Brahma is also referred to as the Pitamaha (Patriarch), Dhatru (Sustainer), Lokेशha (Master of the Universe), Vidhi (Ordinator) and Viswakarma (Architect of the World).

Origin of Lord Brahma

There are several legends on how Lord Brahma was created.

According to Hindu mythology, Brahma rises from the Kamala or Lotus, growing from the Nabhi or navel of Sri Maha Vishnu. Hence, he is also called Nabhija (born from the navel) and Kanja (born from water). Legend has it that his consort, Saraswati, manifested out of him and all creatures of the world resulted from their union.

In the Manu Smriti, Lord Brahma manifested in order to dispel the darkness in the Universe. He first created water and then deposited a seed therein. This seed became a golden egg, from which he was born as Brahma. Dividing the egg into two parts to construct the heaven and earth, Brahma also created the ten Prajapatis, who went on to complete the work of creation.

According to yet another legend, after dividing the golden egg, Lord Brahma separated himself into two parts, the male and the female. From these two halves sprang Viraja and from him Manu.

According to an account from the Ramayana, Brahma sprang from ether and the sages Atri, Angiras, Marichi, Narada, Sanandana, Sanaka, Sanatkumara, Sanasujata and others are his manasa putras or mentally conceived sons. From Marichi came Kashyapa, from whom sprang Vishwavata, who in turn, created Manu, the Procreator of all Human Beings. Thus, Manu became Brahma's great grandson.

Imagery of Brahma

Mythologically, Brahma is believed to have had five heads, originally. Unfortunately, one of these heads was cut down by Shiva in his rage. Hence, Brahma's image now has four heads. He is depicted as the Chaturmukha Brahma, each face looking toward the four quarters.



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THE FOUR VEDAS



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BRAHMA EMERGES FROM VISHNU'S NAVEL

Each of Brahma's heads represent the four Vedas - Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva; the four yugas or epochs - Krita, Treta, Dwapara and Kali; and the four Varnas or classes - Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra.

The four faces have white flowing beards. There are four arms holding up different objects, such as the akshamala (rosary), kurcha (kusha grass), sruk (ladle), sruva (spoon), kamandala (water pot) and pustaka (book), in different poses. Their combination and esoteric relevance vary with each image.

The Akshamala symbolizes time; and Kamandala, the waters of all creation. The kusha, sruk and sruva, denote the types of sacrifices used by creatures to sustain each other. The book represents religious and secular knowledge. The icon may be shown in standing posture on a lotus or in sitting posture on a Hamsa or swan. The Hamsa stands for wisdom and discrimination.



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BRAHMA

Brahma is sometimes also shown riding a chariot drawn by seven swans. This represents the seven worlds. Temples, which are rarely dedicated to Brahma, show his Viswakarma aspect with four heads, the four arms holding the rosary, the book, kusha and kamandala, riding his swan. Temples of Shiva or Vishnu usually have a niche in the northern wall for Brahma as a Parivara Devata and his image receives daily worship.

Except in places such as Pushkar, Ajmer, there are not many temples dedicated to Brahma. Some experts believe that the Brahma cult that had thrived in the pre-Vedic era faded away when the Shiva-Vishnu cults came into being.

Saraswati - the Goddess of Learning



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SARASWATI

The name Saraswati is a combination of two words, Saras (meaning flow) and Wati (meaning a woman). Saraswati, the Hindu Goddess of Knowledge and Learning, is hence likened to a river; flowing with knowledge and supremely alluring, like a beautiful woman. She is depicted as beautiful Goddess with Four arms, wearing a spotless white saree, seated on white lotus. Saraswati is also known as Sharada, Vidya, Vani and Vagdevi. She is regarded as the Goddess of Music, Arts, Science and Technology as well. In East India, she is considered to be the daughter of Durga and sister of Lakshmi. In the South, she is regarded the daughter-in-law of Lakshmi.

Legend of Saraswati

According to the Rigveda, Saraswati is a river as well. In the post-Vedic age, however, she began to lose her status as a river goddess and became associated with literature, arts, music, etc. According to Hinduism, Saraswati embodies intelligence, consciousness,

cosmic knowledge, creativity, education, enlightenment, music, the arts, eloquence and power. Hindus worship her both for academic and divine knowledge.

Some Puranas state that Saraswati is the daughter of Shiva. According to some sects, Saraswati was born from the left body part of Vishnu when He was in his eternal sleep. In any case, Saraswati is generally worshipped as the wife of Lord Brahma. The Devi Mahatmyam too, mentions her as Brahmapatni.

Interestingly enough, she is also sometimes considered Brahmapatni or the daughter of Brahma. Brahma created everything in this Universe and hence, he is believed to have created Saraswati too. This would then make her his daughter.

Maha Saraswati

The Devi Mahatmyam describes Saraswati as one of the Trinity of Maha Kali, Maha Lakshmi and Maha Saraswati. Here, she is depicted as being an eight-armed Goddess. She is included as one form of Mahavidya Tara in Tantra, as Goddess Nilasaraswati. Saraswati is also regarded as a guardian deity in Buddhism - the one who upholds the teachings of Gautama Buddha, by protecting his followers.

Iconography of Saraswati

Saraswati is usually portrayed as a beautiful woman dressed in pure white, often seated on a white lotus, which symbolizes the Absolute Truth. Hence, she is also considered to be the experience of the Highest Reality. The colour white signifies her purity. Occasionally, she is also associated with the colour yellow, the colour of the flowers of the mustard plant, which blooms at the time of her festival in spring. Unlike Goddess Lakshmi, Saraswati is adorned with simple jewels and gold. This represents her preference of knowledge over worldly material things.



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SARASWATI



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SARASWATI

Saraswati is usually shown with four arms, which represent the four aspects of human personality, namely, mind, intellect, alertness, and ego. These four arms also represent the 4 Vedas, which in turn, represent the 3 forms of literature, namely, poetry, prose and music.

Prose is represented by the book in one of her hands, while poetry, by the garland of crystals in her other hand. From another perspective, the book represents Eternal Knowledge, as also her mastery over science and the scriptures. The rosary of crystals embodies the power of spirituality and meditation.

The aspect of music is represented by the Veena, which she is shown playing. The Veena embodies her mastery of all the arts and love for rhythm, music and all the finer emotions.

Some she is shown to be holding a pot of sacred water, which represents purity in all of these three aspects, as well as their power to purify human thought. It signifies her powers of creativity and purification.

A hamsa or swan is usually shown at her feet. When offered a mixture of milk and water, the bird is said to have the wisdom to separate the water from the milk and drink the milk alone. Hence, it symbolizes the power of discrimination between good and bad. Saraswati is also known as Hamsavahini, since the Hamsa is her vehicle.

Sometimes, a peacock is shown near the Goddess. The peacock represents arrogance and vanity. By choosing a peacock as her mount, the Goddess teaches one to go beyond external appearance and to be wise regarding the eternal truth.



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SARASWATI

The Worship of Saraswati

In eastern India, Saraswati Puja is celebrated in the Magha month, which coincides with Vasant Panchami or Shree Panchami. This falls on the 5th day of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of Magha. People place books near the Goddess' statue or picture and worship the Goddess. Book reading is not allowed on this day.

In South India, Saraswati Puja is conducted on the 9th day of Navaratri. The last three days of this ten day festival are dedicated to Goddess Saraswati in this part of India. The Saraswati Puja is conducted along with the Ayudha Puja, the worship of weapons, implements and machines. Books and musical instruments are kept in front of the Goddess Saraswati and worshipped as aspects of the Devi. It is believed that the deity herself is blessing the books and the instruments, and hence, no learning takes place on this day.

Interestingly, there are not many temples dedicated to Saraswati. The Gnana Saraswati Temple in Basar, Andhra Pradesh, is believed to be one of 2 temples in India dedicated to the Goddess.

Saraswati and Brahma - the Relevance of the Divine Couple

Saraswati is known to have subdued the wandering mind of Brahma. According to legend, at the very start of creating this Universe, Brahma is believed to have become enchanted by his own first creation, Shatarupa, goddess of material existence. So amazed was he by her that he sprouted five heads, just so that he could keep watching her at all times, from all directions. Though he followed her wherever she went, he failed to possess this mercurial being.



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HOLY VEDAS

In order to restrain Brahma's lust and get him back to the task of creating the rest of the world, Shiva cut off one of Brahma's heads. Instantly sobered, Brahma turned to Saraswati and learnt to control his drifting mind. The Vedas, which are Saraswati's offspring, showed Brahma the way out of his illusory sensual trap. From that day onward, the four heads of Brahma began chanting the four Vedas. Brahma and his consort, Saraswati, represent the four Vedas. All knowledge, both religious and secular, comes from them.

According to some texts, the name Narayana had first applied to Brahma and only later to Vishnu. In fact, the first three manifestations of Vishnu, namely, the Matsya, Koorma and Varaha avatars, as also all the sages, and Prajapatis were all originally attributed to Brahma, before they shifted to Vishnu. Brahma is believed to have created all the sciences, arts, music, dance and drama. He also later presided over the wedding of Shiva and Parvati.

Vishnu and Lakshmi

Sri Maha Vishnu - the Lord of Sustenance and Preservation

Vishnu is considered to be the Supreme god in the Vaishnavite tradition of Hinduism. The Vishnu Sahasranamam states that Vishnu is the ultimate Paramatman (Supreme Being), the All-Pervading One and the One beyond the past, present and future. He is the one who supports and sustains the Universe and is a force of preservation. Hence, Vishnu is also called the Preserver of the Universe.

The Puranas describe Vishnu as being blue-colored, four-armed, holding a Padma (lotus), Gada (mace), Shankha (conch) and Chakra (wheel). Vishnu is also known to take his gigantic Vishwarupa or the 'Universal Form', from time to time. Vishnu is either worshipped directly or in the form of his ten avatars or manifestations. Among the ten principal avatars, only one, the Kalki Avatara, will take place in the future, at the end of Kali Yuga.



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LORD VISHNU

Lord Vishnu has been associated with infinite auspicious qualities, of which the following are the most important - Jnana or Omniscience; Aishwarya or Sovereignty; Shakti or Energy; Bala or Strength; Veerya or Vigour; and Tejas or Splendor. The Rigveda mentions Vishnu a total of 93 times. Though solar aspects have been associated with Vishnu, he did not embody only the sun, as he is capable of moving around the world, both vertically and horizontally.

Vishnu is known as the doer of the best deeds. He is considered to be equal to Indra, the King of the Devas, and is even the key to Indra's success. Vishnu is not considered a sacrificial deity, but one who lives in the highest of celestial regions, far beyond the other Devas. He is also known to be appeased with a mere prayer, rather than through elaborate rituals.

The Rigveda describes Vishnu as none other than the Sun God who also bore the name Suryanarayana. But the Vishnu Purana describes Vishnu as Narayana, the Supreme Lord who has Sreedevi (Lakshmi) and Bhoodevi (Goddess Earth or Bhoomi) as his wives/consorts.



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DASHAVATARA - THE TEN INCARNATIONS OF VISHNU
and Kalki (the One who would destroy Kali).

In the Puranas, Vishnu is often depicted as coming to the aid of the Devas, helping them fight the asuras (demons) and other evil forces. Indra very often turns to Vishnu, as there are many situations where no one can save him but the Protector God Narayana. Vishnu obliges him by taking his ten avatars (Dashavatara) or reincarnations, including Matsya (the Fish), Koorma (the Tortoise), Varaha (the Wild Boar), Narasimha (the Man-Lion), Vamana (the Dwarf), Parashurama (the Axe-wielding Brahmin), Rama (consort of Sita, slayer of Ravana), Balarama (Krishna's brother), Krishna (the One who bestowed the Bhagavad Gita)

Iconography of Vishnu

Vishnu is depicted as a four-armed male form. The four arms indicate his all-powerful nature. The two arms in front show his control on material existence and the two arms at the back represent his presence in the spiritual world. The color of his skin is dark blue, indicating his all-pervasive nature. Blue is the color of infinite space as well as the infinite Ocean of Milk on which he resides.

On his chest, near the heart, is the Srivatsa mark, symbolising his consort Lakshmi. He also bears the mark of rishi Bhrigu's feet on his chest. Around Vishnu's neck lies the auspicious "Kaustubha" jewel, in which Lakshmi resides, and a Vanamala or garland of flowers. Sometimes he is also shown holding his bow, the Shaaranga, and his sword, Nandaka.

His head is ornamented by an elaborate crown, which symbolizes his supreme authority. This crown is sometimes depicted having a peacock feather, thus displaying an aspect of his own avatara, Krishna. He also wears earrings, representing the inherent opposites in



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LORD VISHNU

creation - knowledge and ignorance; happiness and unhappiness; pleasure and pain.



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ANANTASHAYAN VISHNU

Lord Vishnu reclines on Ananta or Shesha, the immortal thousand-headed snake. Hence, he is considered to be in the Anantashayan or Sheshashayan position on the bed of snakes. At his feet is his consort Lakshmi, pressing his feet.

Vishnu's Shankha, named Panchajanya, held in his upper left hand, represents Vishnu's power to create and maintain the universe. The Panchajanya also represents the five elements or Panchabhootas of water, fire, air, earth and space; and the five Pranas residing within the body of living beings. The conch further symbolizes the Primal Sound of Om, which is also embodied by the Lord himself.



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**OM WITH SHANKHA
AND CHAKRA**

Vishnu's Chakra or Discus, also called the Sudarshana Chakra, is held in the upper right hand and embodies the purified spiritual mind. The chakra represents doing away of ego and the true realization of the non-dual nature of man and God.

The mace or Gada, named "Kaumodaki", is held in the lower left hand. This implies that Vishnu is the source all spiritual, mental and physical strength. It also represents Vishnu's power to destroy materialistic tendencies within the person's consciousness, which poses an obstacle to reaching Godhead.

The lotus flower or Padma, held by the lower right hand, embodies spiritual liberation and the awakening of the spiritual consciousness in the light of god. It also represents Divine Truth or Satya, and Divine knowledge or jnana.

Vishnu's Stance

Vishnu is shown in any of three ways, as follows:

1. Standing upright, on a lotus flower, along with Lakshmi standing beside him.

2. Reclining on the Shesha Naga, with Lakshmi seated at his feet.
3. Riding on Garuda, his Eagle Mount. Garuda carrying Vishnu on his back, symbolizes the Jeevatma carrying the Paramatma within it.



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**STANDING VISHNU
WITH LAKSHMI**



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**RECLINING VISHNU
WITH LAKSHMI**



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**GARUDA CARRYING VISHNU
AND LAKSHMI**

The Vaishnavite View of Vishnu as the Supreme

Vishnu is loved and venerated by Vaishnavites and Shaivites alike. The Vaishnava canon clearly distinguishes Lord Vishnu from other deities like Shiva and Brahma. In the first case, the most commonly accepted iconography of Vishnu is in the reclining position, having Brahma emerging from Vishnu's navel. Hence, Brahma, the Creator of the Universe, is himself said to be created by Vishnu.

Secondly, Brahma and Shiva go on to give boons to demons or Asuras, and as a consequence, they end up making the evil forces stronger. Then it is up to Vishnu to take various avatars to slay or defeat those demons. This is again considered Vishnu's triumph over Shiva's and Brahma's powers.

Vishnu in Sri Vaishnavism

According to the school of Sri Vaishnavism, Vishnu has five forms, which are as follows:

1. In the Para Form, which is the highest form, Vishnu can be found in Sri Vaikuntha (also referred to as Moksha), along with his consort Lakshmi, Bhuma Devi and Nila Devi. He is surrounded by great souls such as Garuda, Ananta and other Muktas.
2. In the Vyuha Form, Vishnu takes four forms, in order to exercise different cosmic functions.
3. In the Vibhava form, Vishnu assumes various manifestations, called Vibhavas or Avataras in order to re-establish righteousness.
4. In the Antaryami Form, the One "dwelling within" or "Suksma Vasudeva" exists within all living beings and in every atom of matter.
5. In the Archavatara or Image manifestation, the Lord is easily approachable to the devotees directly, by way of images and idols.

Lakshmi - The Goddess of Wealth and Beauty

Lakshmi is the Hindu Goddess of wealth, prosperity, wisdom, fertility and courage. She is the very embodiment of beauty, charm and grace. So popular is Goddess Lakshmi that

she is even found in Jain monuments. Also referred to as Mahalakshmi and Shri (the Auspicious One), she is said to bring good luck, and protects her devotees from sorrow and misery. Lakshmi in Sanskrit is derived from its elemental form laks, meaning "to perceive or observe". The name is also related with the term, "lakshya", which means "aim" or "objective".

Lakshmi is endowed with six auspicious qualities or Gunas, and she is the source of strength to Lord Narayana himself. She is the consort of Vishnu and took the form of Sita in the Ramayana. She was Radha, Rukmini and all the other wives of Krishna. Lakshmi is the vital driving force behind Vishnu's energy. In Bengal, Lakshmi is considered to be a daughter of Durga, along with her sister Saraswati and her brothers Ganesha and Karthikeya.

Iconography of Lakshmi



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LAKSHMI

Lakshmi is depicted as a beautiful woman with a glowing, golden complexion, having four hands, sitting or standing on a full-bloomed lotus, holding a lotus bud. The lotus bud stands for beauty, purity and fertility. Lakshmi's four hands represent the four main aims of human life, namely, dharma (righteousness), kama (desires), artha (material wealth), and finally, moksha (liberation from the cycle of birth and death).

From her hands flows a constant, unending stream of gold coins. This goes to imply that those who worship her gain wealth. She is draped in gold embroidered red clothes - the color indicates auspiciousness and the golden lining indicates prosperity.

Usually, two elephants are shown standing on either side of the Goddess, spraying water with their trunks. This denotes that ceaseless effort, in accordance with one's dharma leads the follower to both material and spiritual prosperity.



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LAKSHMI WITH ELEPHANTS

Lakshmi as a Mother Goddess

Lakshmi is considered as a Mother Goddess and is addressed as Mata, and not just as Devi. Lakshmi is also the household deity of most Hindu families, and a favorite among women. Householders worship her for their well-being and prosperity. Businessmen worship her and offer her daily prayers to her, so as to make immense gains in business.

Widely worshipped on a daily basis by several Indian families, her special festive month falls in October. The elaborate Lakshmi Puja is celebrated on the full moon night following

Dussehra or Durga Puja. It is believed that on this full moon night, the Goddess herself visits the homes of her devotees and bestows them with peace, prosperity and wealth. A special worship is also offered to Lakshmi on the auspicious Diwali night.

Lakshmi and Vishnu - the Preservers



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VISHNU AND LAKSHMI

Together, Vishnu and Lakshmi are the embodiment of love and good fortune. They work to bring peace and happiness in this world. They are the Preservers and Maintainers of the Universe, the Ones who bestow both material and spiritual abundance on their devotees.

While Goddess Lakshmi seems to be the submissive one in Vishnu's traditional Ananta Shayan pose, she is in actuality the one who gives the power to Vishnu to carry out his mission. This is amply proved by one legend. Sage Bhrigu, in a rage, had once hit Vishnu's chest with his feet and created an imprint on it. He felt he had been ignored by the divine couple. This was the place that Lakshmi resided, and so, she had been deeply hurt by the sage's misdemeanour and left Vaikuntha.

Her departure made Vishnu sorrowful and the whole world came to a standstill, with evil forces gaining more power and creating anarchy everywhere. It was only after she returned to her Lord in her next lifecycle, that peace and righteousness were re-established in this world.

Shiva and Parvati

Shiva - the Destroyer

Shiva, the "Auspicious One", is also known to be the destroyer or transformer God among the Trimurti. Shiva is an omniscient and omnipresent yogi or mendicant, who lives the life of a sage at Mount Kailas. In Shaivism, Shiva is seen as the Supreme God.

Lord Shiva or Rudra, as he is also known, is generally worshipped in the abstract form of the Shiva Linga. Image-wise, he is depicted as a handsome and strong man, deeply immersed in meditation or dancing the Tandava upon Apasmara, the demon of ignorance, in his manifestation of Nataraja, the Lord of the dance. Shiva is considered as having the authority over death, rebirth and immortality - he retains his youthful looks due to this quality. He is also the father of Ganesha and Karthikeya.



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SHIVA IN MEDITATION

Shiva's Names

Adi Shankara interprets the name "Shiva" as having several meanings, including, the "Eternally Pure One", or "the One who is not affected by three Gunas of Prakriti", as also "the One who purifies everyone by the very utterance of His name". Shiva is considered as Anaadi (no beginning) and Anant (no end - infinite).

The other names of Shiva include Maheshwara and Mahadeva (the Great Lord), Vamadeva, Neelakantha (the One with the Blue Neck), Parameshwara (the Supreme One), Pashupati, Dakshinamurthy and so on.

Shiva's Identification with Vedic Deities

Shiva worship is a very ancient tradition and spans across the length and breadth of India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Shiva is as major a God as Vishnu. This rise in Shiva's position in the Hindu pantheon was probably because of his identification with several major Vedic deities, such as Agni, Indra, Prajapati, Vayu and so on.

Rudra and Agni shared a close relationship. In fact, Agni is called Rudra too. Agni is believed to be a bull and Lord Shiva's vehicle is Nandi, the bull. In medieval sculpture, both Agni and Bhairava, a form of Shiva, have flaming hair.

According to certain schools of thought, Puranic Shiva is a continuation of the Vedic Indra. Both Shiva and Indra are very fond of the divine drink, Soma. Both deities are associated with mountains, rivers, male fertility, fearlessness, fierceness, warfare, the sound of Aum and finally, the Supreme Self.

Shaivism

Shaivism, like Vaishnavism, is a major religious sect in India. Followers of Shaivism, called Shaivas or Saivites, revere Shiva as the Supreme Being. Shaivites believe that Shiva is the Ultimate God, the Creator, Preserver, Destroyer, Revealer and Concealer.

Imagery of Shiva



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SHIVA

Shiva is portrayed as a powerful and rugged youth with matted hair, vibhuti and ash smeared all over his body (this indicates Shiva's aspect of Bhairava, who is associated with ancient Tantra and cremation-ground asceticism), having a Third Eye, wielding the Trishul or the Trident. He wears a crescent moon on his head (which shows the control he wields over his own mind, through the waxing and waning phases of the moon) and the matted Jata on his head holds the Ganga (the flow of the Ganga implies the nectar of immortality), who constantly spouts a thin stream of water.

In depictions of Shiva in the Nataraja form, shown as dancing the Tandava dance, He is shown with four hands. He holds fire in his upper left hand and a Damaru in his upper right hand. The Damaru stands for creation, while the fire, for destruction. He is pressing with his feet the demon Muyalaka, a dwarf holding a cobra. He usually faces south.



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NATARAJA



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SHIVA FACE

He wears serpents (a sign of wisdom) and a garland of skulls as ornaments.

Shiva's Trishul that he holds in his right hand, represents the three Gunas, thus indicating that he rules the world through these three Gunas. The Damaru in His left hand represents the Sabda Brahman. It represents OM from which all languages are formed. It is believed that it was Shiva who formed the Sanskrit language from the sound of the Damaru.

Normally in a highly meditative mood, Shiva opens his third eye only when he is deeply disturbed. This action usually causes massive destruction. He had once burnt down Kama, the God of Love, when the latter tried to disrupt his penance. But Shiva also occasionally opened his third eye to create as well. In the case of Karthikeya's birth, he had initially created six sparks, which turned into six children, which fused together to make one child with six faces. This was Karthikeya or Muruga.

Shiva is blue-throated and hence, he is also referred to as Neelakantha. This occurred in the Samudra Manthan episode, wherein Shiva drank the deadly Halahala poison that churned up from the Ocean of Milk.



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**SHIVA DRINKING THE
HALAHALA POISON**



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SHIVA ON TIGER SKIN

Shiva is often shown seated upon a tiger skin, also wearing tiger skin around his waist. This is an honour reserved only for the most powerful Hindu ascetics, the Brahmarishis. Tiger represents lust. Hence, his sitting on the tiger's skin indicates that He has conquered lust.

Shiva rides the Nandi, the Bull. The Rishabha or the Bull represents the Dharma Devata, the Deity of Righteousness. The Ganas are his attendants. Surrounded by dance and music, accompanied by his consort Parvati, Shiva resides in the frigid peaks of Mount Kailas.



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NANDI THE BULL



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PANCHAMUKHI SHIVA

Sometimes, Shiva is shown with his Five Faces of Satyojata, Vamaka, Tathpurusha, Eeshana and Aghora.

The Many Forms of Shiva

Shiva is given several opposite attributes. While he is the Destroyer, he is also considered the Benefactor. While he is concerned with the cremation ground on the one hand, he is also considered equally auspicious. In fact, the name Shankara, means, "the one who does good". Hence, while he is terrible and fearful in his aspect as the Mahakala, he is equally calm and benevolent in his form as the Dakshinamurthy or the Divine Teacher.

The other strange aspect of Shiva is that he is essentially a Yogi, yet, he is a loyal householder, a loving husband and a doting father of two.

Shiva, in his aspect of Nataraja, is portrayed as Nartaka or dancer. Hence, he is also referred to as Natesha (Lord of Dance) and Nityanarta (the Eternal Dancer). He is most known to perform the Tandava, a vigorous, male-oriented dance, which aids him in performing the tasks of creation, preservation and destruction.

Parvati performs the Lasya, which is a much softer, more feminine version of the dance. Together, their dance represents the balance of opposites in this Universe.

The Ardhanarishvara

The form of the Ardhanarishvara, shows Shiva as the fusing of himself and Parvati in one single body. The right side shows the male half of Shiva and the left side is the female half of Parvati. This shows that the world is a balanced place only when the Universal male-female energy is balanced.



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ARDHANARISHVARA

Worship of Shiva as a Linga



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SHIVALINGA

The worship of Shiva in the form of a Linga, is very important. The Linga is commonly found in the shape of a vertical rounded column. Shiva means auspiciousness, and Linga means a sign or a symbol. Hence, the Shivalinga is regarded as a symbol of the great God, who is also the Auspicious One.

Shiva means "the one in whom the whole creation rests after dissolution". Incidentally, the Linga is also a place where objects get dissolved during the disintegration of the created universe. At present, Shivalinga worship is the most widely accepted type of worship to Lord Shiva.

Maha Shivaratri

The Maha Shivaratri is the main festival of Lord Shiva. Celebrated annually on the 13th night or the 14th day of the new moon in the Krishna Paksha of the month of Maagha or Phalguna in the Hindu almanac, Shivaratri also marks the night when Lord Shiva married Parvati.

On this sacred day, the devotees observe fast and offer fruits, flowers and Bel leaves to the Shiva Linga.

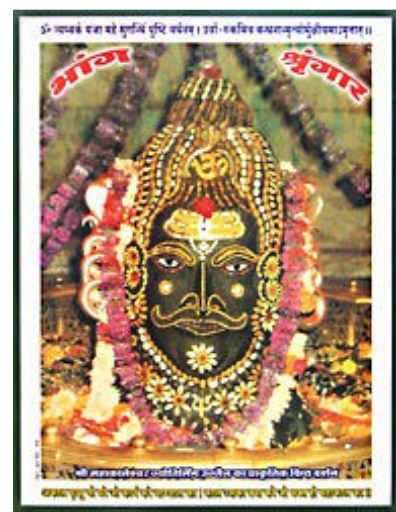
Temples of Shiva

Of all the Shiva temples spread across India, the Jyotirlingas are the most prominent. They are Somnath in Gujarat; Mahakaleshwar in Madhya Pradesh; Omkareshwar also at Madhya Pradesh; Kedarnath at Uttarakhand; Bhimashankar at Maharashtra; Kashi Vishwanath in Kashi, Uttar Pradesh; Trimbakeshwar at Maharashtra; Ramanathaswamy at Tamil Nadu; Grishneshwar at Maharashtra; Vaidyanath at Jharkhand; Nageshwar at Uttarakhand and Mallikarjuna Swamy at Andhra Pradesh.

In South India, there are five temples of Shiva, which are particularly important, as they each represent one of the five elements. These temples are Jambukeshwar (Water), Arunachaleshwar (Fire), Kalahasteeshwar (Air), Ekambareshwar (Earth) and the Nataraja Temple at Chidambaram (Space).

The Amarnath Temple, dedicated to Shiva, in Jammu and Kashmir, is of great significance. Here is where you can find a natural frozen Linga, which is worshipped as the physical embodiment of the Lord Himself.

There are many, many other temples dedicated to the worship of Lord Shiva.



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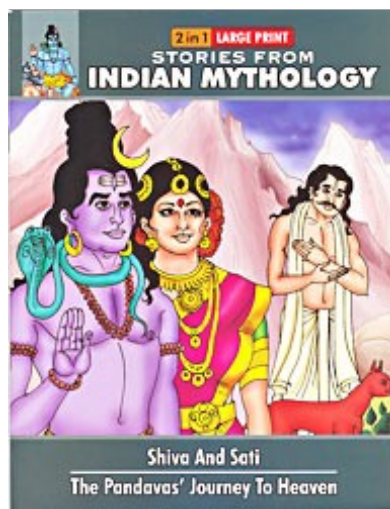
**MAHAKALESHWAR JYOTIRLINGA
IN MADHYA PRADESH**

Parvati - The Daughter of Himavan

Parvati or Shakti is the consort of Shiva and the gentle aspect of Mahadevi, the Great Goddess. Parvati is considered as complete incarnation of Adi Parashakti, with all other Goddesses being her own incarnations or manifestations.

She is the Parvata Raja Kumari, the daughter of Himavan, the King of the Mountains. She is also believed to be the Shyama Krishna Sodari, the sister of Krishna or Vishnu.

Parvati as Sati



The Mother of Ganesha and Karthikeya, Parvati is the reincarnation of Sati, Shiva's first wife. Sati, in humiliation, had jumped into her father, Daksha's, Yagnakuntha (sacrificial fire), when he tried to insult her husband. Daksha never approved of Sati's love for Shiva and always found a way to ridicule the latter. After Sati married Shiva, he refused to accept his son-in-law and cut off all ties with them. When Sati heard of Daksha's Yagna, she went to attend the same, much against Shiva's wishes. Daksha insulted her and Shiva in public and this went beyond Sati's tolerance. She immediately jumped into the fire and gave up her own life. Shiva was bereft on hearing the news and in a rage, stormed into the Yagna, picked up Sati's body on his shoulder and left to his abode, where he stayed single for many hundreds of years, till he found Parvati.

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STORIES OF SHIVA AND SATI

Other Names of Parvati

The term Parvati is sometimes considered a form of "Pavitra" or pure and sinless. Parvati is also referred to as Shailaja or Shailaputri, Bhairava, Kumari, Kali, Uma, Aparna, Lalita, Mata, Sahana, Shyamala, Gauri, Shivangi, Durga, Bhavani, Kamakshi and so on.

Strangely, Parvati is referred to both as Gauri (the Fair One) and Shyamala (the Dark-complexioned One). Legend has it that Parvati was dark in color and so, once Shiva made fun of her complexion. Taking immediate offence, an angry Parvati left him and underwent severe austerities to get a boon to become fair-complexioned. Succeeding in her mission, she went on to become Gauri.

Parvati's Marriage to Shiva

After her death, Sati had come to Shiva and had promised him that she would return to him soon. Parvati was very interested in hearing Shiva's tales, right from her very birth. She remembered her earlier life as Sati. As Parvati grew into a young woman, she began to perform tapas (penance) to please Shiva and to reunite with him. As Aparna, she surpassed all other ascetics in austerity, undergoing severe penance and fasting. She would meditate for days in the biting cold, wearing not even a piece of cloth around her. As Uma, she refused all food and even water.



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PARVATI WORSHIPPING SHIVA

She would then visit him while he was deep in meditation and offer aarti to him. Finally, Shiva decided to test her devotion by appearing in disguise as an old Brahmin, severely critical of Shiva. Parvati, though, remained unaffected by him. Finally, Shiva revealed his true form and conceded to marry Parvati. After the marriage, Parvati moved to Mount Kailash, the residence of Shiva.

The True Significance of the Shiva-Parvati Wedding

Parvati's marriage to Shiva could be seen as an allegory illustrating the desire of an individual to achieve a state of liberation from a life of strife and banality. Spiritually, Shiva represents a state beyond human suffering. Parvati, on the other hand, symbolizes the aspirant seeking to achieve nirvana. Their union actually indicates the final union of the Jeevatma and the Paramatma.

This perspective changes the entire flavour of the relationship between Shiva and Parvati, as of one having high esoteric value, and not merely as a romantic love story. Also, the story of Parvati proves beyond doubt that she too was a powerful ascetic, who transcended the worldly realm.

Imagery of Parvati



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**SHIVA WITH PARVATI
AND GANESHA**

Parvati, when depicted with Shiva, usually appears with two arms. But when she is shown alone, the Goddess is portrayed as having four or eight arms, astride a tiger or lion, sometimes even Nandi, Shiva's Bull. When shown with Shiva, she carries a fully bloomed blue lotus, shows the abhaya mudra and usually has one of her children on her knee. As against other Goddesses who have their eyes fully open, Parvati's eyes are languid and dreamy, as if she just emerged from deep meditation. In her aspect of Parvati, the deity is most commonly depicted along with Shiva, and not alone.

Parvati is referred to as Trigunatmika (having the three Gunas) and yet, as being Nirguna (without any Gunas). She too has three eyes. She is also sometimes depicted with Jatamukuta or a crown of matted hair, just like Shiva. Like Shiva, sometimes she is shown as having a crescent moon bound in her locks.

In many sculpture, Parvati is depicted as bare-breasted, wearing a sacred thread. Bare breasts were considered a mark of divinity in ancient India. Clothes symbolised earthly attachments and nudity was indicative of divinity. She also carries a rosary, mirror, bell, and citron in her four hands.

Normally considered a benevolent Goddess, Parvati also has terrible incarnations, such as Chandi, Durga, Tara, Kali and the darker, Tantric, Mahavidyas. Her benevolent forms include Kamalatmika, Kathyayini, Bhuvaneshwari, Mahagauri, Lalita and so on.

Parvati as the All-Powerful Goddess Shakti

Being Adi Parashakti herself, Parvati is the Goddess of Power. She gives Prana Shakti or life energy to all beings, including Shiva, who is shorn of all power, without her presence in his life. Hence, Parvati is also known as Shakti. Parvati grants the power to all living beings, including Devas and even Asuras, the power see, hear, feel, think, walk, eat, and

do all else. This is why the Goddess is worshiped by all Gods, the Trimurti, Rishis and all other beings.

Parvati features prominently in the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Poet Kalidasa gave Parvati an exalted status through his several works. Just as Shiva is a combination of Rudra, Agni and so on, the Puranic Parvati too is a combinato of Kali, Gauri, Aditi and Nirriti (the Goddess of Sickness and Evil). She features primarily as a Mountain Goddess.

Most Important Forms of Parvati

Parvati took various forms as and when the occasion demanded it. Here is a list of her major manifestations:

- Durga - the form of the Warrior Goddess that she took to defeat demons like Durgam and more importantly, Mahisha. Here, she emerged as the joint strength of all the Devas and wielded each of their weapons in her hands.
- Kali and Chandi - these terrible forms were taken to fight and defeat asuras such as Chanda and Raktabhija.
- The Ten Mahavidyas or the Dus Mahavidya - ten Tantric aspects of Maha Shakti, they all incarnated from Sati, many of them being dark, agressive Goddesses.



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DUS MAHAVIDYA

Worship of Parvati

The Gauri Festival is celebrated on the seventh, eighth, ninth of Bhadrapada, Shukla paksha. She is worshipped as the goddess of harvest and the protector of women. In Rajasthan, she is worshipped as Gauri during the Gangaur festival. The festival starts on the first day of Chaitra the day after Holi and continues for 18 days.

The most popular festival is Navratri, she is worshipped as Durga and also as all her nine manifestations for nine days. During the festival of Gauri tritiya, it is believed that Parvati spends a month at her parent's home. This festival is popular in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

The most popular Parvati temples include Akilandeswari temple at Thiruvanaikaval in Tamil Nadu, Ambaji temple at Gujarat, Attukal Temple in Kerala, Chottanikkara Temple in Kerala, Kamakshi Amman Temple in Tamil Nadu, Meenakshi Temple in Tamil Nadu, the Shakti Peethas and so on. The Vaishno Devi temple at Jammu and Kashmir is her most famous and most celebrated temple.

Parvati and Shiva - Two Halves of a Balanced Whole

Shakti, Shiva's reason of existence, is believed to transcend even Shiva. Just as Shiva is both the deity of destruction and regeneration, the couple jointly symbolise at the same time, both the power of renunciation and asceticism and the blessings of marital felicity. Parvati thus symbolises fertility (as the Mother Goddess of Ganesha and Karthikeya), marital felicity and fidelity to the spouse, asceticism, and power. Parvati represents the ideal Indian householder.

Legends talk about a constant bickering between Shiva and Parvati. Shiva was living with Parvati in her father's house, while they had a terrible argument one day. In a bout of uncontrolled fury, Shiva attempted to walk out on her. But so enraged was Parvati, that ten terrifying forms manifested from her, to block Shiva's every exit. This is how the Dus Mahavidyas came into being.

Parvati civilizes and refines the rugged Shiva with her presence. When Shiva dances his violent, destructive Tandava, Parvati calms him by complementing his dance with her own slow, creative and graceful Lasya.

In fact, according to many myths, Parvati is even seen as his rival, tricking and seducing him away from his ascetic practices. Again, Parvati is also the one to subdue Shiva's immense sexual vitality.

Legend has it that when the linga of Shiva was cursed by the sages and fell on the earth, burning everything before it, Parvati took the form of a yoni and soothed it by holding the linga in her yoni. The Padma Purana also talks about the time when Parvati assumed the form of the yoni to receive the lingam of Shiva, who was cursed by Bhrgu. Parvati's physical union with Shiva symbolises the union of a male and female in ecstasy and sexual bliss.



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**ARDHANARISHVARA
SHIVA AND PARVATI**



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SHIVA AND PARVATI

These stories establish Shiva and Parvati as a balanced whole - telling us about reconciliation, interdependence and harmony - maintaining a family life, while also living with the attitude of an ascetic.

Shaivas look upon Parvati as Shiva's submissive and obedient wife. However, Shaktas focus on Parvati's equality to or even superiority over her consort. Together, Shiva and Parvati constitute the Prakriti-Purusha (feminine and masculine) forces of the Universe. They are opposites, yet are inseparable and interdependent, much like the Yin and Yang.

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>)

Our efforts have been directed at making this article informative and refreshing for you. We will truly appreciate all forms of feedback. Please send your feedback to info@dollsofindia.com.

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