

Mythology of India

The vast repertoire of Hindu mythology & literature is found in the genre of Hindu texts comprising:

- Vedic Literature
- The Great Epics
- Puranas

Many of these legends evolve across these texts, character names change or the story is embellished with greater detail, yet the central message and moral values remain unaltered.

According to famed Indologist Wendy Doniger, Hindu mythology shares the creative principles and human values found in mythology everywhere. However, the particular details vary and its diversity is immense.

Hindu legends embed the Indian thought about the nature of existence, the human condition and its aspirations through an interwoven contrast of characters, the proverbial good against evil, the honest against the dishonest, the dharma-bound lover against the anti-dharma bully, the gentle and compassionate against the cruel and greedy. In these myths, everything is impermanent including matter, love and peace. Magic and miracles thrive, gods are defeated and fear for their existence, triggering wars or debates. Death threatens and re-threatens life, while life finds a way to creatively re-emerge thus conquering death. Eros persistently prevails over chaos.

Hindu mythologies integrate a wide range of subjects. They include stories about how and why cosmos originated, how and why humans or all life forms originated along with each's strengths and weaknesses, how gods originated along with each's strengths and weaknesses, the battle between good gods and bad demons, human values and how humans can live together, resolve any disagreements, healthy goals in stages of life and the different ways in which each individual can live, the meaning of all existence and means of

personal liberation as well as legends about what causes suffering, chaos and the end of time with a restart of a new cycle.

Vedic Literature

The *Vedas* are a large body of texts which were composed in Sanskrit and constitute the oldest extant Sanskrit literature and therefore comprise the oldest Hindu scriptures. The *vedas* are considered to be *apauruseya*, which means 'not of a man, superhuman' and 'impersonal, authorless'.

There are four *Vedas*: the *Rigveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Samaveda* and the *Atharvaveda*. Each *Veda* has been sub-classified into four major text types – the *Samhitas* (*mantras* and benedictions), the *Aranyakas* (text on rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices and symbolic-sacrifices), the *Brahmanas* (commentaries on rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices), and the *Upanishads* (texts discussing meditation, philosophy and spiritual knowledge). Some scholars add a fifth category – the *Upasanas* (worship).

The Vedas, Vedic rituals and its ancillary sciences, called the *Vedangas*, were part of the curriculum at ancient universities such as at Taxila, Nalanda and Vikramashila.

The Rig Veda

The Rig Veda is a collection of 1,028 hymns and 10,600 verses, organised into ten books or *mandalas*. In books 2 to 9, composed earlier, the hymns are dedicated to various deities and discuss cosmology. Books 1 and 10, which were added last, deal with philosophical or speculative questions about the origin of the universe and the nature of god, the virtue of *daan* or charity in society, and other metaphysical issues.

The Rig Veda is one of the oldest extant texts in any Indo-European language. Philological and linguistic evidence indicate that the Rig Veda was composed in the north-western region of the Indian sub-continent, most likely between 1500 and 1200 BCE. Some of its verses continue to be recited during Hindu ceremonies such as weddings and ritual prayers, making it probably the world's oldest religious text in continued use to this day and age.

The Rig Veda is the largest of the four Vedas, and many of its verses appear in the other Vedas. Almost all of the 1,875 verses found in the Sama Veda are taken from different parts of the Rigveda, either once or as repetition, and rewritten in a chant song form. Books 8 and 9 of the Rigveda are by far the largest source of verses for the Sama Veda. Book 10 contributes the largest number of the 1,350 verses of Rig Veda found in the Atharva Veda, or about one fifth of the 5,987 verses in the Atharva Veda text. A bulk of the 1,875 ritual-focussed verses of Yajur Veda, in its numerous versions, also borrow and build upon the foundation of verses in the Rig Veda.

Hymn 1.1 of Mandala 1 of the the Rig Veda is addressed to Agni, and his name is the first word of the Rig Veda. The Rig Veda, in contemporary Hinduism, has been a reminder of the ancient cultural heritage of India.

The Sama Veda

The Sama Veda is the Veda of melodies and chants and a text whose 1,875 verses are primary derived from the Rig Veda. Contained within the Sama Veda is the widely studied Chandogya Upanishad and Kena Upanishad, considered as the primary Upanishads. The classical Indian music and dance tradition considers the chants and melodies in Samaveda as one of its primary roots.

The Yajur Veda

The Yajur Veda Samhita consists of prose mantras. It is a compilation of ritual offering formulas that were said by a priest while an individual performed ritual actions such as those before the yajna fire. Unlike the Sama Veda which is almost entirely based on Rigveda mantras and structured as songs, the Yajur Veda samhitas are in prose and linguistically, they are different from earlier Vedic texts. The Yajur Veda has been the primary source of information about sacrifices during Vedic times and associated rituals.

Atharva Veda

The Atharva Veda was the last of the Vedas to be compiled. The Artharva Veda was not considered as a Veda in the Vedic era, and was accepted as one in the later part of the

1st millennium BCE. Many books of the Atharva Veda Samhita are dedicated to rituals without magic, such as to philosophical speculations and to theosophy. The Atharva Veda has been a primary source for information about Vedic culture, the customs and beliefs, the aspirations and frustrations of everyday Vedic life, as well as those associated with kings and governance. The text also includes hymns dealing with the two major rituals of passage – marriage and cremation.

The Brahmanas

The Brahmanas are commentaries, explanation of proper methods and meaning of Vedic Samhita rituals in the four Vedas. They also incorporate myths, legends and in some cases philosophy. A total of 19 Brahmana texts have survived into modern times.

The substance of the Brahmana text varies with each Veda. For example, the first chapter of the Chandogya Brahmana, one of the oldest Brahmanas, includes eight ritual *suktas* (hymns) for the ceremony of marriage and rituals at the birth of a child.

Aranyakas and Upanishads

The Aranyakas layer of the Vedas include rituals, discussion of symbolic meta-rituals, as well as philosophical speculations. The Upanishads reflect the last composed layer of texts in the Vedas. They are commonly referred to as *Vedanta*, variously interpreted to mean either the 'last chapters, parts of the Vedas' or 'the object, the highest purpose of the Veda'.

The Holy Trinity of Hinduism

Hinduism in its simplest interpretation has a holy Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, together called the *Trimurti*, whose cosmic functions are creation, preservation and destruction respectively. A deity that combines all three forms is called Dattatreya.

Different Hindu communities follow different paths or currents, the most prominent of which are Vaishnavism (Vishnu worship), Shaivism (Shiva worship), Shaktism (goddess worship) and the Smarta tradition (worship of five deities without specific hierarchy).

Vishnu

Lord Vishnu is often depicted resting on a five-hooded serpent with his consort, the Goddess Lakshmi. While Lord Vishnu is worshipped under a myriad names, forms and is said to have manifested himself through the *yugas* or ages – *Satyuga*, *Tretayuga*, *Dwaparayuga*—in different forms to restore the cosmic order, collectively called the Dashavatara or Ten Avatars, the last of which is yet to be manifested in our age – *Kalyuga*. The other nine avatars seem to loosely follow the story of evolution – *Matsya* (fish – piscine), *Kurma* (turtle – reptile), *Varaha* (Boar – Mammal), *Narasimha* (Lion’s face-man’s body), *Vamana* (Dwarf), *Parashurama* (Man of Action), *Rama* (ideal heroic man), *Balarama** (incarnation of Vishnu’s snake Sesa), *Krishna* (the ultimate Brahmana), *Buddha* (the compassionate one) and the yet-to-arrive Kalki.

* *Balarama* – the eighth avatar – is sometimes replaced by Buddha – shown as the ninth avatar after Krishna – especially in post-Buddha texts, in a bid to assimilate Hinduism and Buddhism or by other deities, such as Vithoba.

Shiva

Lord Shiva is the Supreme Being within Shaivism. He is usually worshipped in the form of a *Lingam* but is also represented in the form of Nataraja, the cosmic dancer. His traditional abode is Mount Kailasa. His consort is Parvati, and his sons are Ganesha and Kartikeya.

Shakti

Shakti is the consort of Shiva and is considered the personification of material energy. Like nature she can be nurturing and bountiful but also uncontrolled and dangerous, As Parvati she is kind, but as Kali appears frightening. Durga, in a warlike form, is equipped for battle to protect her devotees. Shakti is often addressed and worshipped as *Devi* (goddess). Shakti is sometimes worshipped as *Tridevi*, the feminine equivalent of *Trimurti*, composed of Saraswati, Lakshmi and Parvati.

Brahma

Lord Brahma does not enjoy popular worship in present-age Hinduism and has lesser importance than the other members of the *Trimurti* viz. Vishnu and Shiva. He is revered in

ancient texts, yet rarely worshipped as a primary deity in India. Very few temples dedicated to him exist in India; the most famous being the Brahma Temple in Pushkar, Rajasthan. However, Brahma temples are found outside India, such as at the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok.

The Epics

Ramayana

The Ramayana, believed to have been originally composed by Sage Valmiki, is one of the largest ancient epics in world literature. It consists of nearly 24,000 verses divided into seven *Kandas* (books) and about 500 *sargas* (chapters). In Hindu tradition, it is considered to be the *adi-kavya* (first poem). It depicts the duties of relationships, portraying ideal characters like the ideal father, ideal servant, ideal brother, ideal wife and ideal king.

There are many versions of the Ramayana in Indian languages, besides Buddhist, Sikh and Jain adaptations. The Ramayana has additionally had a profound impact on art and culture in the Indian subcontinent as well as all over South East Asia, and thus there are Cambodian, Indonesian, Filipino, Thai, Lao, Burmese and Malaysian versions of the epic.

There are diverse regional versions of the Ramayana written by various authors in India. These differ significantly from each other. During the 12th century, Kamban wrote the *Ramavataram*, known popularly as *Kambaramavataram* in Tamil. Gona Budda Reddy wrote a Telugu version titled *Ranganatha Ramayanam*. In the early 14th century Madhava Kandali translated the Ramayana into Assamese, under the name *Saptakanda Ramayana*. In 1576, Tulsidas completed his Awadhi version, the famed *Rama Charit Manas*.

Condensed story of the Ramayana

The story of the Ramayana begins in the great kingdom of Kosala, whose capital was Ayodhya, a city built by Manu himself. It was ruled by King Dasharatha, who had four sons, from his three wives. Rama the eldest was the son of Kausalya; Lakshmana and Shatrughana, the twins were born to Sumitra; and Bharata was born to Kaikeyi.

When he came of age, Rama accompanied the sage Vishwamitra to Mithila, where he won the hand of Princess Sita, at a *swyamvara* (husband-choosing ceremony). He was the only Prince able to pick up Shiva's bow and string it, during which action he broke the mighty bow in two!

After some years, King Dasharatha decided to hand over his throne to Rama, his eldest son, a decision that was welcomed with joy by the entire Kingdom. However, prodded by her maid, Manthara, Kaikeyi asks Dasharatha to honour two boons that he had granted her decades before when she had nursed him back to health after being grievously injured in battle. Kaikeyi demands that her son Bharata be crowned King, and that Rama be exiled to the forest for fourteen years. A heart-broken Dasharatha is left with no options. Rama himself cheerfully accepts his father's orders, and immediately leaves for the Dandaka forest with his wife Sita, and devoted younger brother Lakshmana.

After many adventures in the forests of Central India, one day Lakshmana is accosted by a demoness Soorpanakha, sister to the mighty ruler of Lanka Ravana. He cuts off her nose and ears, and the angered demoness makes her way to Lanka and beseeches Ravana to avenge her. She tempts him by singing praises of the beauty of Sita. Despite the good counsel of his brother Vibheeshana, Ravana immediately decides to abduct Sita. Using his uncle Mareecha (disguised as a golden deer) as bait, which lures Rama and Lakshmana away from Sita, he abducts her from their hermitage. On their journey back to Lanka, the old King of the Vultures Jatayu tries to stop Ravana, but is mortally wounded after a fierce battle and falls.

Rama and Lakshmana, in their desperate quest to find Sita, come upon the heroic Jatayu and learn of Ravana abducting Sita. Journeying further south, they meet Sugreeva, a *vanara* (monkey) prince who has been exiled from his kingdom by his elder brother Vali after a misunderstanding. This is when Sugreeva's minister Hanuman becomes Rama's loyal and eternal devotee. Rama kills Vali, after which Sugreeva becomes the King of Kishkindha. With his new power, he sends groups of *vanaras* in all directions to find Sita.

Hanuman and Angada (Vali's son) head south, and meet Sampati (Jatayu's brother). On hearing of his brother's valiant death, he tells the *Vanaras* that Ravana has taken Sita to

Lanka and kept her captive there. When the *vanaras* proceed, and reach the southern sea, Jaambavan (the bear king) reminds Hanuman of his superhuman strength, for after all he is the son of Vayu (the wind god). Hanuman increases his size and jumps across the sea to Lanka.

In Lanka, he finds Sita in the Ashok Vatika, pining away for Lord Rama. She refuses to go back with him, asking instead that Lord Rama come to Lanka and take her away. Hanuman agrees, but first lays waste to Ashok Vatika. In Ravana's court his tail is set on fire, after which he proceeds to burn the city of Lanka down, before flying back to Lord Rama with the good news that Sita has been found. Subsequently Ravana holds a council of war where his brothers Kumbhakarna and Vibheeshana tell him that he has sinned by kidnapping Sita. But whereas Kumbhakarna's loyalty prevents him from going against his elder brother, Vibheeshana's commitment to the right cause forces him to leave Ravana's side.

The *Vanara* army makes its way to the ocean, where Vibheeshana meets them, asking for sanctuary. Rama accepts him as a friend. Building a bridge across the river, under the guidance of Nala (son of the divine architect Vishwakarma), with the permission of Varuna (the ocean god), the *Vanaras* soon reach Lanka.

After a fierce battle, the entire Rakshasa army is defeated, and Rama slays Ravana with a well-aimed arrow that hits him in the navel (his weak spot). After crowning Vibheeshana King of Lanka, Sita undergoes an *agni-pariksha* (trial by fire) from which she emerges unscathed, and returns with Rama and Lakshmana to Ayodhya on the divine flying vehicle, the Pushpaka Vimana.

The Mahabharata

The Mahabharata was composed by Ved Vyasa, son of the rishi Parashara. On Brahma's advice, he asked Lord Ganesha to write it down as he recited it. Ganesha agreed with the caveat that once he began, his pen would not stop, so Vyas had to recite the epic continuously. Vyas agreed with a counter condition – that Ganesh would not write down anything he didn't understand. With this understanding between poet and scribe,

Vyasabegan to recite the story, which was so swiftly transcribed by Ganesha that whenever he wanted a rest, he would compose a stanza that was worded in a way that it would take Ganesha time to comprehend it, thus earning Vyasa some breathing space!

According to legend the Mahabharata was first revealed to the populace by the sage Vaishampayana at a great Yajna conducted by King Janamejaya (son of Parikshit, and great grandson of Arjuna).

It all begins when the goddess Ganga marries a smitten King Santanu of Hastinapura on the condition that he would never question her, or any of her actions. In the course of time she gives birth to 7 sons, but drowns each one at birth. A horrified Santanu stops her from repeating this ghastly act with the 8th born son. She now reveals who she is, and that she was helping the eight Vasus to fulfil a curse of spending a life on earth in the quickest manner possible. The eighth son, Devavrata, stays with his father, whilst Ganga leaves for her heavenly abode.

When Santanu asks Matsyagandha's fisherman father for her hand in marriage, the latter demands that Matsyagandha's sons would inherit Santanu's kingdom. For his father's happiness, Devavrata takes the terrible vow of lifelong celibacy, and is known as Bheeshma from this point onwards. Santanu and Satyawati (Matsyagandha) have two sons Chitrangada and Vichitravirya. Vichitravirya has two sons, Dhritarashtra and the younger Pandu.

Since Dhritarashtra was born blind, Pandu becomes King after Vichitravirya. Dhritarashtra is married to Gandhari, a princess of Gandhara. He has 100 sons (the Kauravas) and a daughter from her, with Duryodhana being the eldest. Pandu's wives Kunti and Madri have 5 sons (the Pandavas), but their fathers are Gods, as Pandu is cursed in such a manner as to not be able to father a child. After Pandu's death, Dhritarashtra assumes the Kingship again.

As the Kauravas and Pandavas grow up together, there is immense rivalry and enmity between them. In their youth, the Kauravas try to kill Bhima and the other Pandavas but fail in their evil efforts. They are all taught the art of warfare by Kripacharya, and later by Dronacharya. The rivalries intensify as they grow into adulthood, all vying for the same kingdom. Karna, a peerless warrior, and a son of Kunti's (the sun-god being his father), is

humiliated by Arjuna- under the impression that he is a charioteer's son, but is accepted as a friend by Duryodhana. Karna, universally known for his generosity, even gave away the life-saving armour and earrings (*kavacha* and *kundala*) that he was born with, to Indra (Arjuna's father), knowing fully well that he was making himself vulnerable. He also promises his mother Kunti that he will spare 4 of her sons, but will have a fight to the death with Arjuna, stating that she will have 5 sons alive at the end of the war.

Arjuna wins the hand of Draupadi (daughter of Drupad, King of Panchala) at her Swayamvara. When told by his mother to share his 'prize' with his brothers, Draupadi is compelled to accept all the 5 Pandavas as her husbands.

The Pandavas build themselves a beautiful capital city named Indraprastha. Duryodhana, intensely jealous of the happiness, success and magnificence of the Pandavas, invites Yudhishthira to play a game of dice, which the latter accepts, despite being counselled otherwise. Playing against Shakuni (Duryodhana's maternal uncle), who uses a set of magical dice, he loses his kingdom, his wealth, and eventually himself, his brothers and Draupadi. When Draupadi is brought to the court, Dushasana (Duryodhana's younger brother) starts disrobing her, but Lord Krishna saves her from dishonour. Dhritarashtra returns all of Yudhishthira's losses, but yet another game of dice ensues. Yet again Yudhishthira loses, and this time the Pandavas are sent off to the forest for a 13 year-long exile in which the last year was to be spent incognito. If discovered, they were to proceed for another 12 year-long exile.

The Pandavas spend the last year at the court of King Virata, after which they stake a claim to their lost kingdom. Duryodhana refuses to part with their fair share, refusing even the land on which a needle point would rest. After this war is imminent, and Krishna joins the Pandavas – but states that he would not actually take up arms as he is related to both sets of brothers.

The battle – fought at Kurukshetra identified in modern Haryana – begins with Arjuna refusing to take up arms against his elders and his kith and kin, at which point Lord Krishna reveals his true form to him and recites the Bhagavad Gita to him. Exhorted thus to do his

dharma (duty), and to not worry about the results of his actions, Arjuna takes up arms, and thus begins the great battle which lasts 18 days.

On the tenth day, the Kaurava commander-in-chief, Bheeshma falls, mortally wounded by Arjuna's arrows, after refusing to take up arms against Shikhandin (born as a woman). His place is taken up by Dronacharya, who himself falls on day 14, and is succeeded by Karna. Arjuna slays Karna on the battlefield, and finally Bheema kills Duryodhana (after earlier killing all other 99 sons of Gandhari) thus fulfilling a vow that he had made earlier.

At the end of the war, the Pandavas emerge triumphant, and Yudhisthira is crowned King. A few years later, the Pandavas and Draupadi leave the Kingdom and set off on their final journey, and passing briefly through hell, reach heaven where they are reunited with their kinsmen.

The Mahabharata has inspired several books, plays, TV shows as well as movies. The most notable one of all is the TV series called Mahabharata which was directed by BR Chopra. The Bhagavad Gita itself is considered the most sacred of all Hindu texts.



Lord Krishna and Kansa

Lord Krishna is one of the most worshipped deities across India. In some traditions, rather than being one of the three supreme Gods of Hinduism, Lord Krishna himself is the one true God. Such practices alone to come under Krishna worship. The birth of Lord Krishna is celebrated as *Janmashtami* during the Hindu month of Shravan, around August.

Kansa, the son of King Ugrasena of Mathura deposes and imprisons his father and seizes the throne. A prophecy states that Kansa will be killed by the eighth son of his sister Devaki. Enraged, he locks up Devaki and her husband Vasudev in prison, where he kills all her newborn children. However, Lord Krishna, the 8th son of Devaki and Vasudev, manages to escape the clutches of Kansa. He is brought up by Yashoda, wife of Nanda, as her son, at Vrindavan near the town of Mathura. Lord Krishna's childhood is marked by mischievous escapades. He eats mud, steals butter and milk from nearby households and troubles his mother constantly. However, he frequently displays his divine powers: the evil Putana who attempts to feed him poisoned milk mysteriously dies of the poison herself; when asked to spit out the mud he has eaten, he opens his tiny mouth and shows the entire universe to a bemused Yashoda; he saves the villagers from incessant rain by lifting the Govardhana mountain on his little finger, and by battling the giant serpent Kaliya with ease. Once Lord Krishna grows up, he returns to Mathura where he kills Kansa in a wrestling bout, frees his parents from captivity and reinstates Ugrasena to the throne of Mathura.



Krishna slaying Kansa

The Puranas and the Mahapuranas

The *Puranas* are ancient texts that tell the stories of various deities, and in a sense consist of narratives of the history of the universe from creation to destruction, genealogies of kings, heroes, sages, and demigods, and descriptions of Hindu cosmology, philosophy, and geography. Each *Purana* usually gives prominence to a particular deity, employing an abundance of religious and philosophical concepts. The *Puranas* are believed to have been composed by the sage Ved Vyasa.

Of the many texts designated as *Puranas*, the most important are the *Mahapuranas*. These are said to be eighteen in number, divided into three groups of six, though they are not always counted in the same way. Others include the *Upapuranas*, the *Sthala Puranas* and the *Kula Puranas*.