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God, Overview



Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi
College of Humanities & Social Sciences –
Languages & Literature, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi
University, Katra, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Introduction

Westerners have a misconception about Hinduism that they worship 330 million gods [1, 4]. For that, many ignorant Hindus give a justification that actually we have one God (with capital “G”), and 330 million representations of the same God, for which we orthographically use gods (with small “g”); however, we see one “God” in each and every particle of this universe, i.e., in space and time, animals, minerals, trees, mountains, and geometrical patterns. Dwivedi, in his poem, “My God” succinctly expresses this Hindu conception/misconception:

“My God is just an idea.
He takes His birth from my language,
When I speak He becomes a sound,
And like an atom He flows in my ears.
His light makes me see things around,
And his presence I feel everywhere.
He is my truth, my culture.
Sometimes He makes my language hyperbolic.
He is simply fantastic.
He is sea, earth, and fire,
A demon, animal and human.

He is in my thoughts, beliefs, and feelings.
He is like love, irrational,
Yet without Him, I am not complete [2].”

The phrase “trayastrimsati koti” is mentioned in many Hindu scriptures, including *Atharva* and *Yajur Veda* and *Satapatha Brahman* which is often misunderstood as 33 million gods. The root of this misconception lies in the ambiguous nature of the Sanskrit lexicon *koti* (means both “type/supreme” and “33 million”) [9]. The *Rig Veda* mentions three chief Gods – Surya (“sun”) in the sky, Vayu (“air”) in the air, and Agni (“fire”) on earth. Further, this number increases to thirty-three (33) [7].

There is a dialogue between Sakalya and Sage Yajnavalkya at King Janak’s court, mentioned in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (Chap. 3), where Sakalya asks seven times the same question to Yajnavalkya “how many gods are there?” to which Yajnavalkya replies: (1) “Three hundred and three.” Then he says, “Three thousand and three”; (2) and then he says “thirty-three”; (3) then after much deliberation, Yajnavalkya reaches to “six gods”; (4) then he says, “only three gods”; (5) then he says, “two gods”; (6) then “one and a half gods”; (7) and finally he says, “one god.” When Sakalya asks to name them, Yajnavalkya answers, 33 are the principal manifestations, and others are only forces, powers, energies, glories, and radiances. The principal manifestations are: 8 are Vayus, 11 Rudras, 12 Adityas, and Indra and Prajapati (Tables 1 and 2).

God, Overview, Table 1 Hindu Gods according to Yajnavalkya

Hindu Gods		
Yajnavalkya's reply	Count	Who are they?
First time	303 and 3003	They are only forces, powers, energies, glories, and radiances
Second time	33	8 are Vayus, 11 Rudras, 12 Adityas, and Indra and Prajapati
Seventh time	1	Genderless Supreme Brahman

God, Overview, Table 2 Thirty-three principal manifestations

Principal manifestations	Count	Who are they?
Vayu	8	Fire; earth; air; atmosphere; sun; heaven; moon; stars
Rudras	10	5 sense organs; 5 action organs; 1 mind
Adityas	12	Forces that take vitality of people
Indra	1	Rain
Prajapati	1	Sacrifice

One Supreme God (Brahman), Hindu Trinity, and Many Gods

Earliest Hindu scriptures, including *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, focus on the one Supreme Being. In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, a phrase *ekam eva adviteeyam* which means “there is but One without a second” illustrates this. This hymn in *Chandogya Upanishad* holds that God and the universe are one and the same, and this view remains the basis of Hinduism. One Supreme Soul/God is identified as *Brahman* (“to grow” or “to burst forth”) who is expansive, self-existing, and without limit. *Brahman* (a genderless – neither masculine nor feminine) creates, destroys, and re-creates itself, along with the universe and its forces [10]. There is a creation hymns in Rig Veda which states:

In the beginning,
There was neither Being nor Non-Being

God, Overview, Table 3 Gods and goddesses and their functions

God	Function	Female consort	Role
Brahma	To create the universe; creator	Saraswati	The goddess of learning
Vishnu	To sustain the universe; preserver	Lakshmi	The goddess of wealth and well-being
Shiva	To destroy the universe; destroyer	Shakti	The goddess of power

Neither sky, earth, nor what is beyond and beneath.

What existed? For whom?

Was there water?

Death, immortality?

Night, day?

Whatever there was, there must have been one

The Primal one (God)?

Self-created, self-sustained, by his own heat,

Unaware of himself

Until there was desire to know himself.

That desire is the first seed of the mind, say seers

Binding Non-Being with Being.

What was above and what was below?

Seed or soil?

Who knows?

Who really knows?

Even the gods came later.

Perhaps only the primal being knows.

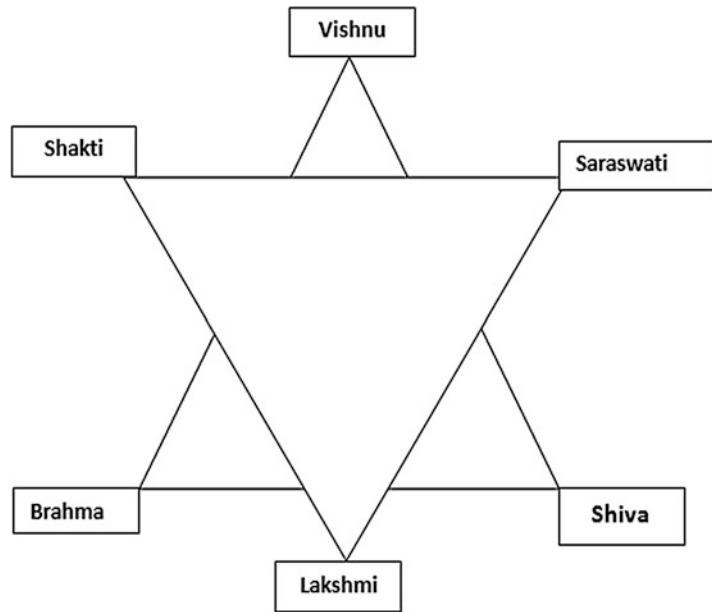
Perhaps not.

(Rig Veda) [7]

But we find many gods and goddesses; and their various narratives provide to a Hindu follower a variety of choices to choose their gods/goddesses for worshipping. In Hinduism, there are three gods at the head of a hierarchy of gods: Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh, along with their female consorts (Table 3).

While the roles and functions of the gods and goddesses appear different, Hindus believe that they regularly exchange their functions and roles when situations demand. The evidences of human interaction with the gods begin at the Hindu trinity level. The tasks performed by the three gods of creating, caring, and completing the life cycle are covered four yugas (“periods”), namely, *Krita Yuga* (432,000 × 4 years), *Treta Yuga*

God, Overview,
Fig. 1 The Hindu trinity



God, Overview, Table 4 Geometrical shapes and Hindu deities

Geometrical shapes	Associated with deity	Meaning of shapes
Circle	Brahma and Saraswati	The nature of the universe
Square	Vishnu and Lakshmi	The formation of cultural codes
Point	Shiva and Shakti	The realization of soul and matter

(432,000 × 3 years), *Dwapara Yuga* (432,000 × 2 years), and *Kali Yuga* (432,000 years) (Fig. 1).

Three geometrical shapes, the circle of Brahma and Saraswati, the square of Vishnu and Lakshmi, and the point of Shiva and Shakti, best illustrate the Hindu metaphysics. In essence, these shapes also give us insight about how the universe is formed, how cultural codes came into being, how these codes are different from natural laws, and how soul is realized and matter validated. Circle represents the Hindu universe which is cyclical, timeless, fetterless, and infinite. The square, with four 90-degree sharp edges, is the artificial shape. And when it is drawn in the circle, it represents best the human-made culture. Inside

the circle, the four edges of square may touch at numerous points of circumference of the circle that indicates that different cultures can have various ways or orientations but all cultures are dependent upon nature for their survival. The point or dot represents soul that is the basis of all human beings. And without a dot, not circle, square, or any other geometrical shape can be drawn (Table 4).

This universe is the medium through which God and Goddess (Brahma-Vishnu-Mahesh and Saraswati-Lakshmi-Shakti) present themselves. Therefore, every element of this universe serves as window to the divine.

Brahma: The Creator

In Hinduism, Brahma who looks like a priest is the creator God. He chants Vedic hymns and in his four hands He holds a lotus, a book of Vedas, a spoon, and a waterpot. Since Brahma is God of creation, therefore He does not carry any weapon. He has four heads facing the four directions which represent different perspectives and an appreciation for the world in its totality [11, 12]. Through his instruments which He holds in his four hands, He conducts the ritual of the creation of this

universe. Mostly rituals start with the sound om “vowel sound [a], [u], and nasal [m]” and conclude with *shanti, shanti, shanti* “Peace, peace, peace,” i.e., harmony and peace are aims of each ritual.

The Vedic scriptures describe that Brahma does not create this world but He made all creatures aware of it [8]. However, the world created or made aware by him is known as *Brahmanda* “universe.” Unlike western religion, this created world is not just the outer natural world governed by the principles of physics, but it is also the inner personal and cultural world of feelings and thoughts. Brahma’s consort Goddess Saraswati “Goddess of knowledge” embodies the discovered world in her. One of her names is *Shatarupa* “hundred forms,” and accordingly she can take infinite forms. Brahma gets answer of the question, who am I, in her as she reflects through her infinite forms what is knowable and knowledgeable.

Vishnu: The Organizer

Vishnu, the blue-colored warrior God, organizes the universe. He brings forth rhythm into the natural world so that all the changes of *Brahmanda* “universe” become manageable and predictable. The rhythm represents management of the universe. Vishnu’s consort Lakshmi has two forms: one desirable and another undesirable. Lakshmi represents wealth, and also fertile and auspicious trough of nature, such as the day, the high tide, the spring, the rains, the waxing moon, and the harvests, whereas barren and inauspicious trough of nature, i.e., the night, the low tide, summers and winters, the waning moon, and the drought, is associated with Alakshmi. Hindus worship Lakshmi and seek her blessings [3].

Vishnu also establishes culture through nature. Within culture, human beings can explore their potentials and look at things which are beyond survival. They can generate wealth and create art. The culture is a construct which is made of society where each one has a role to play. In Hinduism, one must abide to the rules and regulations of the society so that no one would be directionless and

irresponsible. Out of three Goddesses, Lakshmi sits on the top of the hierarchy, and following this Hindu society is also hierarchical.

Mahesh or Shiva: The Destroyer

The Shiva is an ascetic, and He is totally unmindful of the universe around. He sits naked atop snow-clad Kailash-Mansarovar mountain. Shiva’s phallus is erect but his eyes are shut, indicating that He is aroused by the serenity of the soul. Human beings take birth and die; traditions and cultures rise and fall; seasons come and go; but Shiva meditates on the absolute truth – permanent and unconditional. This indicates that purification of the soul leads to enlightenment, and with enlightenment comes ananda “tranquil bliss.” Actually, Shiva’s meditation represents that soul is supreme which is above action or inaction and beyond body and its earthly desire [6].

Shiva’s consort is Shakti, aka Gauri, Kali, Durga, and Maya. When she is Gauri, she is gentle and affectionate; when she is Kali, she is wild and fearsome; when she is Maya, she is an embodiment of all delusions; and as Shakti, she is primal energy. Shakti is the world Shiva shuts himself from. As Durga, she is invincible. She is at once warrior and bride – the one who provides pleasure, makes home, produces offspring, and prepares food [5].

330 Million Deities’ Metaphor

In Hinduism, all creation is divine and therefore worthy of worship. Hindus visualize them in plants, rivers, mountains, rocks, and animals. Also the worshippers see divine in man-made constructs, such as pots, pans, pebbles, and pebbles. But only mutually accepted and socially established natural and man-made gods are considered worthy of worship. However, a ritual known as *darshan* “looking at God” plays an important role in the life of Hindus. It is believed that worshippers tell about their conditions to

Gods, and the deities look at their condition and respond to it [13].

Though God is omniscient, still it is very much required to meet God personally in his abode – temple, river, cave, or any other forms. Devotees suffer long and they wait for hours and sometimes days to have darshan. There is also a provision of VIP and VVIP darshans at some temples, such as *Shirdi Ke Sai Baba* (in Maharashtra), *Tirupati Balaji* (in Andhra Pradesh), and *Mata Vaishno Devi* (in Jammu and Kashmir); and often worshippers prefer to bribe the pundits/priests for quick and special *darshans*. Sometimes *darshans* last for a few seconds, and locally people call such *darshans* as *jhanki* “a teasing glimpse.”

There are also stories where God turned to the devotee so that he may have a *darshan*. In the temple at Udipi, the image of God used to face the east, and only high-caste people were allowed to enter into the temple. A true devotee, namely, Kanakdasa who was a low-caste born, stood outside the temple and was desperate for the *darshan*. Surprisingly, the image in the sanctum turned west, and this made Kanakdasa to see him through the crack in the western wall. This story also throws light on hierarchy and stratification in Hindu society, i.e., out of 330 million gods are divided into and distributed among men and women of high-caste- and low-caste-born Hindus.

There are numerous stories that indicate that gods and goddesses can be anything and can be anywhere. But there is only one common requirement: they should respond to the human condition. Sometimes gods are mere a pair of eyes, a rock in a cave, a tree growing on a hill, a cow on the street, or man-made statue. But some gods and goddesses are more popular than the others, and for that reason they are richer, getting donations in gold and silver. Divine sensitivity and responsiveness vary and dependent upon the divine potency of the gods and goddesses. The confluence of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna is more sacred than any other, and *Amarnath* “the eternal god” is more revered than other gods.

If someone questions why there are so many gods and goddesses in Hinduism, the answer to this query is found in Hindu scriptures itself. In Vedic period there were no temples, and there

were no permanent shrines. People were nomadic and they used to perform *yagna* where they would sit around a fire altar, chanting hymns and offering milk and butter into the flames [4]. That phase of Hinduism, falls between 1500 B.C. and 500 B.C., is known as *karma kanda* “age of rituals,” focusing on execution of rituals for desired results. When Hindus gave up nomadic lifestyle, and settled to agricultural life, they started focusing on appeasement and adoration of deities this phase of Hinduism, falls between 500 A.D. and up to the present, is known as *upasana kanda* “age of worship.” Between these two ages, there was a transition period *gyan kanda* “age of speculation” which falls between 500 B.C. and 500 A.D. During this period, Hindus were contemplating on deeper understanding of desire and destiny.

Gods and Popular Culture

Changes in Hindu society have occurred at many levels. The language of worship has changed from Classical Sanskrit to Khariboli; the condition of marginalized sections, such as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and backward classes, has been reformed; women are now no longer a weaker sex but have achieved an equal status to men; and Hindu gods and goddesses have been filmed in cartoons, soap operas, and movies. The CD/DVDs have replaced cassettes; piracy, plagiarism, and criminal support to the film industry have increased; and print media has gone online. Consequently, gods and goddesses, though sacred, have entered into the daily humor, and Hindus have started employing the language of humor for gods. Dwivedi writes that the creative aspect of language allows the Hindus to coin new registers to capture the essence of gods and goddesses in their day-to-day lives, and therefore they start using the register of jokes [2].

The jokes about Gods are fantastic and hyperbolic in nature like myths and folklores. The difference between a myth and joke is of longevity. The joke is a recent phenomenon, originating and developing in the mind of the language users or found in SMS and Internet texts. Gods are sacred and jokes are funny, but this analogy does not

make the proposition that Hindu gods are funny; however, jokes about gods create serious laughter. There is a joke about Lord Shiva's family:

Shiv ji Where is my trident?
(God,
husband):
Parvati Ganesh (God, son) has taken it.
(Goddess,
wife):
Shiv ji: Why?
Parvati: He was saying, "I am taking Dad's
fork to eat noodles with my
girlfriend."

And in another joke:

Radha Sometimes in the guise of Lord
(girlfriend of God Ram (a virtuous god). . .sometimes
Krishna): in the guise of Shyam (a naughty
Krishna god) you come to me.
(God of But why?
love):
Radha: If you come in the same get up papa
will recognize.

Also there are several jokes in which there is comparison of Hindu Gods with computer terminologies: Brahma (creator) is system installer, Vishnu (preserver) is system operator, Shiva (destroyer) is system programmer, Narad is data transmitter, Yama (god of death) is Delete[®], Apsara (Hindu nymph) is virus, Saraswati (goddess of knowledge) is Internet Explorer, Parvati (goddess of power) is motherboard, and Lakshmi (goddess of money) is automated teller machine (ATM) [2].

The jokes are notorious for their concern with the blending of the sublime with the trivial. The use of jokes for God by the Hindus reflects that pop culture has impacted the psyche of the worshipers so much so that they do not find it degrading. Also, there is a thin line between the understanding of laughter (jokes about God) and misunderstanding of fun making (making fun of God).

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