

Hindu Mythology

Vedic and Puranic

BY

W. J. Wilkins

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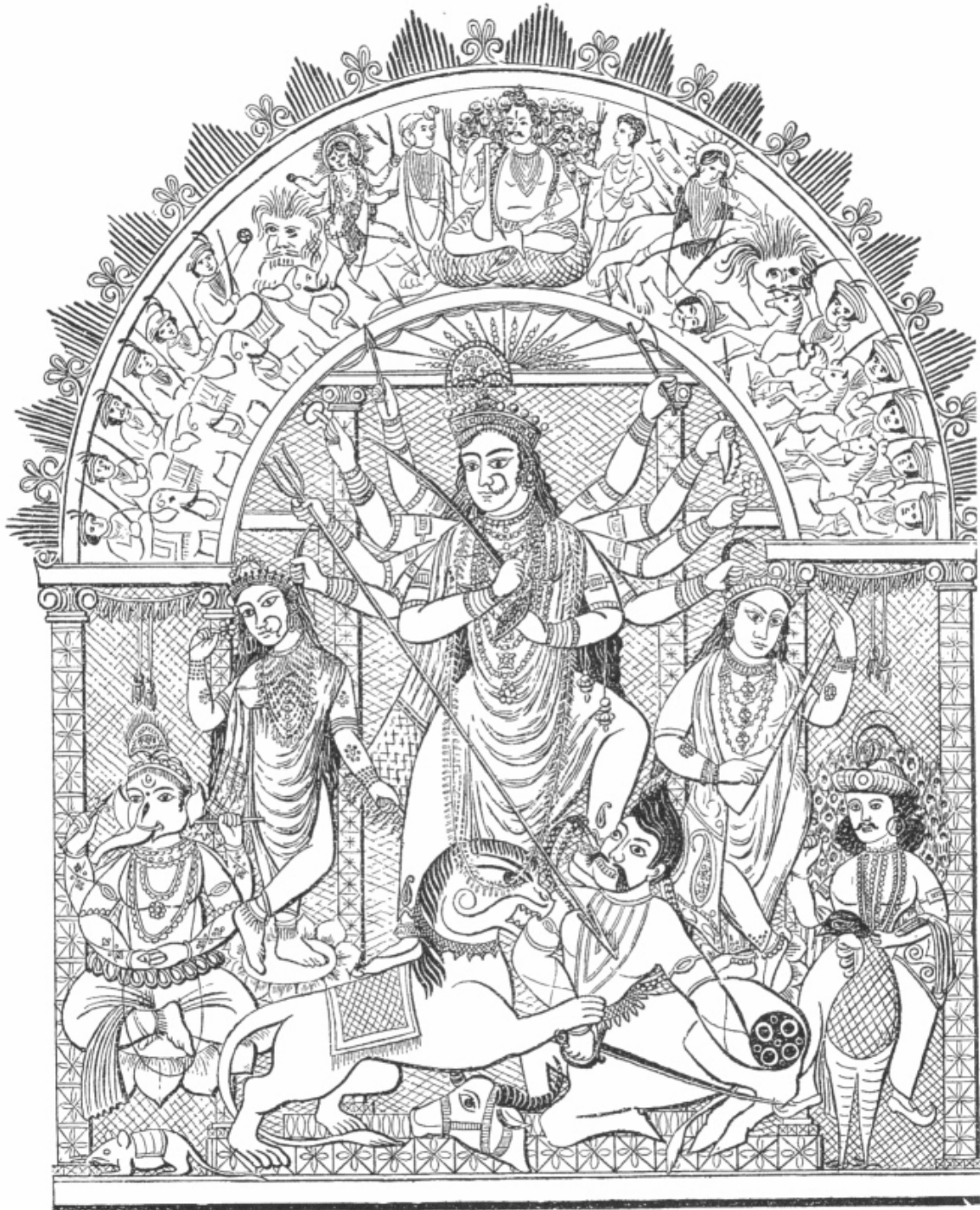
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Ganesa.

Lakshmi.

DURGĀ.

The Demon
Durga.

Sarasvati.

Kartikeya.

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The tail pieces are taken from drawings of Hindu temples and decorations in the works of Ram Raz, Rajendralala Mitra, Fergusson, and others.

PREFACE

On reaching India, one of my first inquiries was for a full and trustworthy account of the mythology of the Hindus; but though I read various works in which some information of the kind was to be found, I sought in vain for a complete and systematic work on this subject. Since then two classical dictionaries of India have been published, one in Madras and one in London; but though useful books of reference, they do not meet the want that this book is intended to supply.



For some years I have been collecting materials with the intention of arranging them in such a way that any one without much labour might gain a good general idea of the names, character, and relationship of the principal deities of Hinduism. This work does not profess to supply new translations of the Hindu Scriptures, nor to give very much information that is not already scattered through many other books. In a few cases original extracts have been made; but, generally speaking, my work has been to collect and arrange translations ready to hand. It has been my endeavour to give a fair and impartial account of these deities, as far as possible in the words of the sacred books; such an account as I should expect an honest-

mind Hindu to give of God from a careful study of the Bible. I have honestly striven to keep free from prejudice and theological bias; and, wishing to let the sacred books speak for themselves, have refrained from commenting on the passages quoted, excepting where some explanation seemed necessary. I have not selected those texts which describe the darker side only of the Hindu gods, nor have such been altogether suppressed. There was much that could not be reproduced. Of what was fit for publication I have taken a proportionate amount, that this, together with what is worthy of commendation, may give a faithful picture. To magnify either the good or the evil is the work of the advocate - a work I, in this book, distinctly disclaim. An honest effort has been made to give a reliable account of the things commonly believed by millions of our Hindu fellow-subjects.

In order to render the work more interesting and instructive, a number of illustrations of the principal deities have been introduced. Most of them have been copied from pictures drawn by the Hindus themselves, and which may be seen in the houses of the people. No attempt has been

made to idealize them; they are, what they profess to be, faithful representations of the designs of Hindu artists. For their kindness in making these drawings from the original highly-coloured pictures, I am very greatly indebted to my friends the Rev. A. J. Bamford, B.A., and Messrs. H. T. Ottewill and C. A. Andrews, B.A.

By the introduction of a full index it is hoped that this work will serve as a classical dictionary of India; whilst the classification of the gods will enable the student to obtain a general view of Hindu mythology, and of the relation in which one deity stands to others. And as many legends are given at some length, the book can hardly fail to be interesting to the general reader, who may not have time or opportunity to refer to the sacred writings from which they are taken.

A word of explanation respecting the classification of the deities is called for. It will be noticed that some of those described as belonging to the Vedic Age appear under the same or other names in the Puranas; whilst others spoken of as belonging to the Puranic Age have their origin, traceable indeed with difficulty in some cases, in the Vedas. It was a common practice with the writers of the later books to claim a remote antiquity, and the authority of the Vedas, for the more recent additions to the Pantheon. In some instances an epithet, descriptive of one of the old deities, is attached as the name of a later one. And by this means the old and the new are linked together. The Vedic gods are those whose description is chiefly to be found in the Vedas, and whose worship was more general in the Vedic Age; the Puranic are those who are more fully described in the Puranas, and whose worship was more general in the Puranic Age. Any very rigid classification it is impossible to make.

W. J. W.

CALCUTTA, February 22, 1882.

PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

As a large edition of this work has been sold out, and a new one called for, an opportunity is presented of adding a few words to what was said eighteen years ago. The reception given to it both in India and in England was most gratifying, practically the only serious condemnation of it being that I had not pronounced judgment on much that I had quoted from the Hindu sacred books. This was a task that I distinctly disavowed in my preface. I set out with the intention of rigidly abstaining from comment, commendatory or condemnatory. I feel that a mere statement of much that was written in books professedly inspired by God, carried its own condemnation. And at the same time it was a pleasure to indicate how, amid much evil, there was also much good. The sages of India were not in complete darkness. As we examine the earlier writings, the light was bright indeed contrasted with what came later. It is most instructive to notice the marked deterioration in the quality of the teaching, deities as described by the earlier sages being vastly better than their successors declare them to be. "Non-Christian Bibles are all developments in the wrong direction. They begin with some flashes of true light, and end in darkness." As Max-Muller says, "The more we go back, the more we examine the earliest germs of any religion, the purer I believe we shall find the conceptions of the Deity."

In this edition there is some added matter. Errors have been corrected, and an attempt made to render certain passages more clear that were somewhat obscure. Substantially the book remains the same. An account of the ordinary worship and the festivals of these gods will be found in another work - "Modern Hinduism."

W. J. W. ,1900.

PART I.

THE VEDIC DEITIES

THE VEDAS

Before speaking of the Vedic Deities, it is necessary that something be said concerning the Vedas themselves, the source of our information concerning them. The root of the word is vid, "to know;" hence the term Veda signifies knowledge; and as these books were not written for centuries after they were originally composed, it signifies knowledge that was heard, or orally communicated. The Vedas are not the work of a single person, but, according to popular belief, were communicated to a number of Rishis or saints, who in their turn transmitted them to their disciples. The Seer Vyasa is styled the arranger, or, as we should now say, the editor, of these works.

The instruction contained in these writings is said to have been breathed forth by God Himself. Other writers teach that it issued from Him like smoke from fire. Sometimes the Vedas are said to have sprung from the elements. The accounts of their origin, though differing in form, agree in teaching that they were the direct gift of God to man; and hence they are regarded with the greatest veneration. They are the special property of the Brahmans. As early as Manu, the nominal author or compiler of a law book probably not more than two or three centuries later than the Vedas, though some suppose it to have been no earlier than A.D. 500, it was regarded as a grave offence for a single word of these divinely given books to be heard by a man of a lower caste.

The Vedas are four in number; of these the Rig-Veda is the oldest, next in order was the Yajur-Veda, then the Sama-Veda, and last of all the Atharva-Veda. Each of these Vedas consists of two main parts: a Sanhita, or collection of mantras or hymns; and a Brahmana, containing ritualistic precept and illustration, which stands in somewhat the same relation to the Sanhita as the Talmud to the Law. In these are found instructions to the priests who conduct the worship of the gods addressed in the hymns. Attached to each Brahmana is an Upanishad, containing secret or mystical doctrine. These are regarded as of lesser authority than the Mantras and Brahmanas. For whilst they are spoken of as Sruti, i.e. heard, the Upanishads are Smriti, learned. Though based on the older compositions, if there is any discrepancy between them, the teaching of the later ones is rejected. The Sanhita and Brahmana are for the Brahmans generally; the Upanishads for philosophical inquirers. Yet, strange to say, whereas the older portions had, until recent years, been almost entirely neglected, with some parts of the Upanishads there was considerable acquaintance amongst the learned pundits of Benares and other places. In many parts of India not a man could be found able to read and interpret them. Of the Sanhitas, the "Rig-Veda Sanhita - containing one thousand and seventeen hymns - is by far the most important; whilst the Atharva-Veda-Sanhita, though generally held to be the most recent, is perhaps the most interesting. Moreover, these are the only two Vedic hymn-books worthy of being called separate original collections;" the others being almost entirely made up of extracts from the Rig-Veda. Between the time of the composition of the Rig-Veda and that of the Atharva, considerable changes in the religious faith of the people had come about. The childlike trust of the earlier hymns has disappeared, and the deities now seem more cruel, and there is greater need of propitiatory offerings. Probably the old religion of the people whom they had conquered had begun to tell on that of the Aryans.

The Sanhitas of three of the Vedas are said to have some peculiarity. "If a mantra is metrical, and intended for loud recitation, it is called Rich (from rich, praise) whence the name Rig Veda; i.e. the Veda containing such praises. If it is prose (and then it must be muttered inaudibly), it is called Yajus (yaj, sacrifice, hence, literally, the means by which sacrifice is effected); therefore Yajur-Veda signifies the Veda containing such yajus. And if it is metrical, and intended for chanting, it is called Saman (equal); hence Saman Veda means the Veda containing such Samans. The author of the Mantra, or as the Hindus would say, the inspired 'Seer,' who received it from the Deity, is termed its Rishi; and the object with which it is concerned is its devata - a word which generally means a 'deity,' but the meaning of which, in its reference to mantras, must not always be taken literally, as there are hymns in which not gods nor deified beings, but, for instance, a sacrificial post, weapons, etc., invoked, are considered as the devata. It should, however, be noticed that the deifying of a "sacrificial post" or a "weapon" is in perfect harmony with the general pantheistic notions which prevailed amongst the people then as now: so that there is nothing unnatural according to their religious ideas in speaking even of inanimate objects as deities. There is little doubt that the Brahmanas are more recent than the Sanhitas.

The Vedas have not come down to the present time without considerable dispute as to the text. As might have been expected, seeing that this teaching was given orally, discrepancies arose. One account mentions no less than twenty-one versions (Sakhas) of the Rig-Veda; another gives five of the Rig-Veda, forty-two of the Yajur-Veda, mentions twelve out of a thousand of the Saman-Veda, and twelve of the Atharva-Veda. And as each school believed that it possessed the true Veda, it anathematized those who taught and followed any other. The Rig-Veda Sanhita that has survived to the present age is that of one school only, the Sakala; the Yajur-Veda is that of three schools; the Sama-Veda is that of perhaps two, and the Atharva-Veda of one only.

"The history of the Yajur-Veda differs in so far from that of the other Vedas, as it is marked by a dissension between its own schools far more important than the differences which separated the school of each [of the] other Vedas. It is known by the distinction between a Yajur-Veda called the Black - and another called the White - Yajur-Veda. Tradition, especially that of the Puranas, records a legend to account for it. Vaisampayana, it says, a disciple of Vyasa, who had received from him the Yajur-Veda, having committed an offence, desired his disciples to assist him in the performance of some expiatory act. One of these, however, Yajnavalkya, proposed that he should alone perform the whole rite; upon which Vaisampayana, enraged at what he considered to be the arrogance of his disciple, uttered a curse on him, the effect of which was that Yajnavalkya disgorged all the Yajus texts he had learned from Vaisampayana. The other disciples, having been meanwhile transformed into partridges (tittiri), picked up these tainted texts and retained them. Hence these texts are called Taittiriya. But Yajnavalkya, desirous of obtaining Yajus texts, devoutly prayed to the Sun, and had granted to him his wish - 'to possess such texts as were not known to his teacher.'" And thus there are two Yajur-Vedas to this day; the Black being considered the older of the two.

As to the date of the Vedas, there is nothing certainly known. There is no doubt that they are amongst the oldest literary productions of the world. But when they were composed is largely a matter of conjecture. Colebrooke seems to show from a Vaidick Calendar that they must have been written before the 14th century B.C. Some assign to them a more recent, some a more ancient, date. Dr. Haug considers the Vedic age to have extended from B.C. 2000 to B.C. 1200, though he thinks some of the oldest hymns may have been composed . B.C. 2400. Max-Muller

gives us the probable date of the Mantra, or hymn portion of the Vedas, from B.C. 1200 to B.C. 800, and the Brahmanas from B.C. 800 to B.C. 600, and the rest from B.C. 600 to B.C. 200.

There is nothing whatever in the books themselves to indicate when they were written. All references in them are to their being given orally, learned, and then again taught audibly to others. Probably for centuries after the art of writing was known in India it was not employed for preserving the sacred books, as in the Mahabharata those who write the Vedas are threatened with the punishment of hell.

THE VEDIC GODS GENERALLY

Yaska (probably the oldest commentator on the Vedas) gives the following classification of the Vedic gods. "There are three deities, according to the expounders of the Vedas: Agni, whose place is on the earth; Vayu or Indra, whose place is in the air; and Surya, whose place is in the sky. These deities receive severally many appellations in consequence of their greatness, or of the diversity of their functions." In the Rig-Veda itself this number is increased to thirty-three, of whom eleven are said to be in heaven, eleven on earth, and eleven in mid-air. "Agni, the wise god, lends an ear to his worshippers. God with the ruddy steeds, who lovest praise, bring hither those three-and-thirty." This is the number usually mentioned, though it is by no means easy to decide which are the thirty-three intended, as the lists found in various places vary considerably; whilst in another verse it is said that "three hundred, three thousand, thirty-and-nine gods have worshipped Agni."

These deities, though spoken of as immortal, are not said to be self-existent beings; in fact their parentage in most cases is given; but the various accounts of their origin do not agree with each other. Agni and Savitri are said to have conferred immortality upon the other gods; whilst it is also taught that Indra obtained this boon by sacrifice. An interesting account is given in the Satapatha Brahmana of the means by which the gods obtained immortality, and superiority over the asuras or demons. All of them, gods and demons alike, were mortal, all were equal in power, all were sons of Prajapati the Creator. Wishing to be immortal, the gods offered sacrifices liberally, and practised the severest penance; but not until Prajapati had taught them to offer a particular sacrifice could they become immortal. They followed his advice, and succeeded. Wishing to become greater than the asuras, they became truthful. Previously they and the asuras spoke truthfully or falsely, as they thought fit; but gradually, whilst they ceased from lying, the asuras became increasingly false; the result was that the gods after protracted struggles gained the victory. Originally the gods were all equal in power, all alike good. But three of them desired to be superior to the rest, viz. Agni, Indra, and Surya. They continued to offer sacrifices for this purpose until it was accomplished. Originally there was not in Agni the same flame as there is now. He desired, "May this flame be in me," and, offering a sacrifice for the attainment of this blessing, obtained it. In a similar manner Indra increased his energy, and Surya his brightness. These three deities form what is commonly described as the Vedic Triad. In later times other three took their place, though an attempt is made to show them to be the same.

It will be noticed that each of the gods is in turn regarded by the worshipper as superior to all the others. In the Vedas this superlative language is constantly employed, and identical epithets are indiscriminately given to various deities. Professor Max-Muller says, "When these individual gods are invoked, they are not conceived as limited by the power of others, as superior or inferior in rank. Each god, to the mind of the supplicants, is as good as all the gods. He is felt at the time as a real divinity, as supreme and absolute, in spite of the limitations which, to our mind, a plurality of gods must entail on every single god. All the rest disappear for a moment from the vision of the poet, and he only who is to fulfill their desires, stands in full light before the eyes of the worshippers. . . . It would be easy to find, in the numerous hymns of the Rig-Veda, passages in which almost every single god is represented as supreme and absolute."

The will of these gods is sovereign; no mortal can thwart their designs. They exercise authority over all creatures. In their hands is the life of mortals. They know the thoughts and intentions of men, and whilst they reward the worshipper, they punish those who neglect them.

When the Puranic deities are described it will be noticed that the representations of the deities of that age are far more clearly defined than those of earlier times. Though the Vedic gods are spoken of as possessing human forms and acting as human beings, there is considerable vagueness in the outline. But as time goes on this is lost. The objects of worship are no longer indistinct and shadowy, but are so minutely described that their portraits could be easily painted. And as their physical features are no longer left to the imagination, so their mental and moral characters are fully delineated. They are of like passions with those who depict them, only possessing vastly greater powers.

Professor Williams says "that the deified forces addressed in the Vedic hymns were probably not represented by images or idols in the Vedic period, though doubtless the early worshippers clothed their gods with human forms in their own imaginations." Professor Muller speaks more positively: "The religion of the Veda knows of no idols. The worship of idols in India is a secondary formation, a later degradation of the more primitive worship of ideal gods." The guarded language of Professor Williams seems to be better suited to the facts, as far as they are known, for Dr. Bollensen speaks quite as strongly on the other side. He writes, "From the common appellation of the gods as *divo naras*, 'men of the sky,' or simply *naras*, 'men,' and from the epithet *nripesas*, 'having the form of men,' we may conclude that the Indians did not merely in imagination assign human forms to their gods, but also represented them in a sensible manner. Thus a painted image of Rudra (*Rig-Veda*, ii. 33, 9) is described with strong limbs, many-formed, awful, brown, he is painted with shining colours." "Still clearer appears the reference to representations in the form of an image. 'I now pray to the gods of these (*Maruts*).' Here it seems that the *Maruts* are distinguished from their gods, i.e. their images." "There is in the oldest language a word, '*Sandris*,' which properly denotes 'an image of the gods.'"

We shall now proceed to the consideration in detail of the deities as described in the Vedas.

Sarasvati, the wife of Brahmā.
Sastī, the goddess.
Sati, a name of Umā.
Satrughna, a brother of Rāma Chandra.
Satyavān, a hermit restored to life by Yama.
Savitri, identical with Surya, wife of Satyavān.
Savitripati, a name of Brahmā.
Sesha, the serpent deity, incarnate in Balarāma.
Siddha-Senāni, a name of Durgā.
Singhavāhini, a name of Durgā.
Sivā, the Destroyer.
Skanda, a name of Kartikeya.
Smarahāra, a name of Siva.
Sparsana, a name of Vāyu.
Srāddhadeva, a name of Yama.
Sri, a name of Lakshmi.
Sri Kanta, a name of Siva.
Sthānu, a name of Siva.
Subhadrā, sister of Krishna.
Subramanya, a name of Kartikeya.
Sugriva, king of the monkeys, a son of Surya.
Sugriva, a messenger of the demons, sent to Durgā.
Sukra, preceptor of the asuras, a planet.
Sumbha, a demon slain by Durgā.
Supernakhā, sister of Rāvana.
Superna, a name of Garuda.
Suryā, wife of the Asvins.
Sushna, a name of Vritra.
Swarga, Indra's heaven.
Swargapati, a name of Indra.
Swayambhu, a name of Vishnu.

Tārā, a monkey leader.
Tārā, wife of Vrihaspati, a name of Durgā.
Taraka, a demon.
Tarika, a demon.
Tārini, a name of Durgā.
Tryambaka, a name of Siva.
Tulsī, a sacred plant.
Tvastri, or Visvakarma..

Umā, wife of Siva.

Vāch, the goddess of speech, identified with Sarasvati.
Vāhans, or vehicles of the gods.
Vahni, a name of Agni.
Vaikunthanātha, a name of Vishnu.

Vaisrāvana, a name of Kuvera.

Vaisravas, a name of Pulastya.

Vaivasvata, a name of Yama.

Vaka, an asura slain by
Bhīma.

Vānars, the monkeys who
assisted Rāma Chandra.

Vasishtha, a son of Brahmā.

Vasudeva, the father of
Krishna.

Vāta, a name of Vāyu.

Vāyu, a storm-god.

Vedāvati, a name of Sitā.

Vijayā, a name of Durgā.

Virabhadra, an emanation of
Siva.

Viradha, a giant slain by
Rāma Chandra.

Vishvamvara, a name of
Vishnu.

Visvamisra, a hermit.

Visvarūpa, a son of
Visvakarma.

Vītihotra, a name of Agni.

Vivaswat, a name of Surya.

Vrihaspati, the preceptor of
the gods, one of the planets.

Vritraha, a name of Indra.

Vyāsa, a Rishi.

Yādapati, a name of Varuna.

Yadus, heroes of the
Mahābhārata.

Yajneswara, a name of
Vishnu

Yakshi, wife of Kuvera.

Yoganindra, the energy of
Krishna.

Yudhisthira, a son of
Dharma.



PIPAL LEAVES.