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Saiva or Shaivism: Generally South India

- The character and position of the Vedic god Rudra—called Shiva, “the Auspicious One,” remain clearly evident in some of the important features of the great god Shiva, who together with Vishnu came to dominate Hinduism.
- Major groups such as the Lingayats of southern India and the Kashmiri Shaivas contributed the theological principles of Shaivism and Shaiva/Saiva worship became a complex amalgam of pan-Indian Shaiva philosophy and local or folk worship.

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- In the minds of the ancient Hindus, Shiva was the divine representative of the uncultivated, dangerous, and unpredictable aspects of nature. Shiva’s character lent itself to being split into partial manifestations—each said to represent only an aspect of him—as well as to assimilating powers from other deities.
- Already in the Rigveda appeals to him for help in case of disaster—of which he might be the originator—were combined with the confirmation of his great power.

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- In the course of the Vedic period, Shiva—originally a ritual and an outsider, yet a mighty god whose good aspects were readily emphasized—gradually gained access to the circle of prominent gods who preside over various spheres of human interest.
- Many characteristics of the Vedic Prajapati the creator; of Indra, the god of rain and of the thunderbolt; and of Agni the Vedic god of fire, have been merged into the figure of Shiva.

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- In those circles that produced the Shvetashvatara Upanishad (c. 400 BCE), Shiva rose to the highest rank. Its author proposed a way of escape from samsara, proclaiming Shiva the sole eternal Lord. Rudra-Shiva developed into an ambivalent and many-sided lord and master.
- His many manifestations, however, were active among humankind: as Pashupati ("Lord of Cattle"), he took over the fetters of the Vedic Varuna; as Aghora ("To Whom Nothing Is Horrible"), he showed the uncanny traits of his nature (evil, death, punishment) and also their opposites.

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- Like Vishnu, Shiva is held by devotees to be the entire universe, yet he is worshipped in various manifestations and in hundreds of local temples.
- Although it is not always clear whether Shiva is invoked as a great god of frightful aspect, capable of conquering demonic power, or as the boon-giving lord and protector, Hindus continue to call on him during rites.

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- Shiva reconciles in his person semantically opposite though complementary aspects: he is both terrifying and mild, destroyer and restorer, eternal rest and ceaseless activity. These seeming contradictions make him a paradoxical figure, who transcends humanity with a mysterious sublimity.
- From the standpoint of his devotees, his character is so complicated and his interests are so widely divergent as to seem incomprehensible. Yet, although Brahman philosophers like to emphasize his ascetic aspects and the ritualists of the Tantric tradition his sexuality, the seemingly opposite strands of his nature are generally accepted as two sides of one character.

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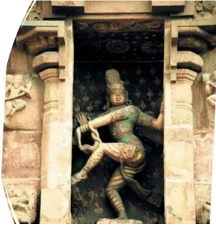
- Shiva temporarily interrupts his austerity and asceticism to marry Parvati, and he combines the roles of lover and ascetic to such a degree that his wife must be an ascetic (yogi) when he devotes himself to austerities and a loving companion when he is in his erotic mode.
- This dual character finds its explanation in the ancient belief that, by his very chastity an ascetic accumulates (sexual) power that can be discharged suddenly and completely, resulting in the fertility of the soil.

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- Various mythical tales reveal that both chastity and the loss of chastity are necessary for fertility and the process of regeneration in nature. The erotic and creative experiences portrayed in these narratives are a familiar feature in Hinduism, and they counterbalance the Hindu bent for asceticism.
- Such sexuality, while rather idyllic in Krishna, assumes a mystical aspect in Shiva, which is why the devotee can see in him the realization of the possibilities of both the ascetic life and the householder state.
- His marriage with Parvati is then a model of conjugal love, the divine type of human marriage, sanctifying the forces that carry on the human race

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- Shiva's many poses express various aspects of his nature. The cosmic dancer he is the originator of the eternal rhythm of the universe, dancing through its creation and destruction.
- He also catches, in his thickly matted hair, the waters of the heavenly Ganges River, which destroy all sin. He wears in his headdress the crescent moon, which drips the nectar of everlasting life.



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- Shiva is the master of both *tandava*, the fierce, violent dance that gives rise to energy, and *lasya*, the gentle, lyric dance representing tenderness and grace.
- Holding a drum upon which he beats the rhythm of creation, he dances within a circle of flames that depicts the arc of dissolution.
- He holds up the palm of one hand in a gesture of protection; with another he points to his foot to indicate the refuge of his followers.

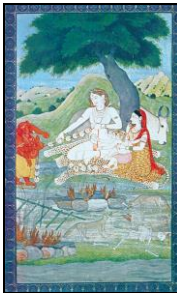
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- The image of the dancing Shiva is said by Shaivites to portray five cosmic activities: creation, maintenance, destruction, concealing his true form from adversaries, and, finally, the grace through which he saves his devotees.
- The outer form of the dance, however, is only one aspect of the divine flow of energy; followers of Shiva say that the dance is in the heart of every devotee.

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- Shiva also represents the unpredictability of divinity. He is the hunter who slays and skins his prey and dances a wild dance while covered with its hide. Far from society and the ordered world, he is an ascetic, who burns kama, the god of love, to ashes with a glance from the third eye—the eye of insight beyond duality—in the middle of his forehead.
- And at the end of the age/s, he will dance the universe to destruction. He is nevertheless invoked as Shiva, Shambhu, Shankara (“Benignant” and “Beneficent”), for the god that can strike down can also spare. Snakes seek his company and twine themselves around his body. He wears a necklace of skulls.
- He sits in meditation, with his hair braided like a hermit’s, his body smeared white with ashes. These ashes recall the burning pyres on which the sanyasis (renouncers) take leave of the social order of the world and set out on a lonely course toward release, carrying with them a human skull.

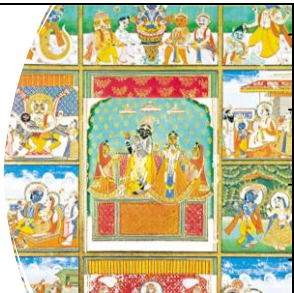
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- Shiva’s consort is Parvati (“Daughter of the Mountain [Himalaya]”), a goddess who is an auspicious and powerful wife.
- She is also personified as the Goddess (Devi), Mother (Amba), black and destructive (Kali), fierce (Chandika), and inaccessible (Durga).
- As Shiva’s female counterpart, she inherits some of Shiva’s more fearful aspects. She comes to be regarded as the power (*shakti*) of Shiva, without which Shiva is helpless. Shakti is in turn personified in the form of many different goddesses, often said to be aspects of her.

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Vishnu,
Vaisnava and
Vaishnavism



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North India (generally)

- Vaishnavism is the worship and acceptance of Vishnu (Sanskrit: "The Pervader" or "The Immanent") or one of his various incarnations (avatars) as the supreme manifestation of the divine. During a long and complex development, many Vaishnava groups emerged with differing beliefs and aims.
- Some of the major Vaishnava groups include the Shrivaiṣṇavas (also known as Viśiṣṭādvaitins) and Madhvas (also known as Dvaitins) of South India; the followers of the teachings of Vallabha in western India; and several Vaishnava groups in Bengal in eastern India, who follow teachings derived from those of the Saint Chaitanya
- Most Vaishnava believers, however, draw from various traditions and blend worship of Vishnu with local practices.

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- In the Vedas and Brahmanas, Vishnu is the god of far-extending motion and pervasiveness who, for humans in distress, penetrates and travels the entire cosmos to make their existence possible. All beings are said to dwell in his three strides or footsteps (*trivikrama*): his highest step, or abode, is beyond mortal ken in the realm of heaven.
- Vishnu is also the god of the pillar of the universe and is identified with sacrifice
- He imparts his all-pervading power to the sacrificer who imitates his strides and identifies himself with the god, thus conquering the universe and attaining "the goal, the safe foundation, the highest light" (Shatapatha Brahmana).

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- In the centuries before the Common Era, Vishnu became the Ishvara (supreme deity) of his worshipers, fusing with the Purusha- Prajapati figure; with Narayana, worship of whom discloses a prominent influence of ascetics; with Krishna, whom the Bhagavadgita identified with Vishnu in many forms; and with Vasudeva, who was worshipped by several groups

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- The extensive mythology attached to Vishnu is largely that of his avatars. Although this notion is found elsewhere in Hinduism, it is basic to Vaishnavism. Each of his incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama, has a particular mythology and is the object of devotion (*bhakti*). The classical number of these incarnations is 10—the *dashavatara* (“ten avatars”)—ascending from animal form to fully human forms.
- They are Fish (Matsya), Tortoise (Kurma), Boar Man-Lion Dwarf, Rama-with-the-Ax, King Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and the future incarnation, Kalkin. This list varies, however, according to the text within which it appears and the devotional group that maintains it.

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- For example, some *dashavatara* lists include Balarama, the brother of Krishna, instead of the Buddha. Moreover, the number of incarnations is not fixed across all texts or traditions; some texts list 24 incarnations of Vishnu.
- In addition, a particular *dashavatara* list popularized by the 13th-century poet Jayadeva in his song *Gita Govinda* names Krishna, not Vishnu, as the supreme deity who incarnates himself 10 times.
- In Jayadeva’s list the first seven incarnations are the same as those found in other Vaishnava lists. Jayadeva then lists Balarama and Buddha as the eighth and ninth incarnations. One common element in all these lists is Kalkin, who is always the final incarnation.

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Vishnu & Consort, Vishnu & Garuda



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- Like most other Hindu gods, Vishnu has his especial entourage: his wife is Lakshmi, or Shri, the lotus goddess—granter of success, wealth, and liberation—who came forth from the ocean when gods and demons churned it in order to recover from its depths the ambrosia or elixir of immortality, amrita.
- At the beginning of the commercial year, special worship is paid to her for success in personal affairs. Vishnu's mount is the bird Garuda, archenemy of snakes, and in his four hands are his emblems: the lotus, conch shell, and his two weapons, the club and the discus.

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- Whatever justification the different Vaishnava groups (such as the Shrivaisnavas of South India or the worshipers of Vishnu Vithoba in Maharashtra, North India) offer for their philosophical position, all of them believe in God as a person with distinctive qualities and worship him through his manifestations and representations. Many schools teach that it is through divine grace that the follower is lifted from transmigration to release.
- Much of Vaishnava faith is monotheistic, whether the object of adoration be Vishnu Narayana or one of his avatars. Preference for any one of these manifestations is largely a matter of tradition. Thus, most South Indian Shrivaisnavas worship Vishnu in one of his many local manifestations; the North Indian groups prefer Krishna.
