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Understanding Hinduism

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Abstract

The complexity and diversity of Hinduism present both challenges and opportunities for understanding its practices and beliefs. One effective way to simplify and systematize these elements is through the teachings of Adi Shankaracharya, a revered philosopher and theologian from the early 9th century.

Shankaracharya is best known for establishing the Shanmata tradition, a comprehensive six-sect system designed to unify Hindu worship. This tradition incorporates six major deities, which represent various aspects of the divine and cater to the diverse spiritual needs of practitioners. By acknowledging multiple forms of worship, Shankaracharya aimed to create a more inclusive approach to Hindu spirituality.

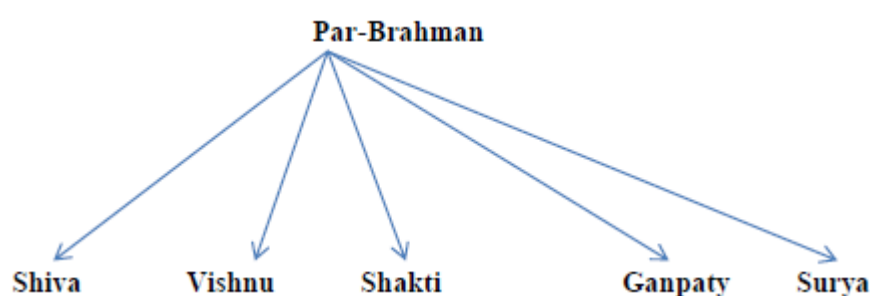
In addition to the Shanmata tradition, Shankaracharya popularized the Panchayatan puja system, which focuses on the worship of five principal deities: Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Surya, and Ganesha. Notably, this system omits Skanda, the god of war, which highlights the emphasis on these five deities as the core figures in Hindu worship. The Panchayatan puja not only aids individuals in choosing a personal deity for devotion but also fosters a sense of community among practitioners who may follow different paths within the broader Hindu tradition. Overall, Shankaracharya's teachings serve as a crucial framework for understanding and practicing the rich tapestry of Hinduism.

Key Words: Hinduism, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktiism, Sauryaism, Ganpatya, Smartism, Shiva, Vishnu, Devi, Surya, Ganpaty, Smart, Ram, Krishna, Shankaracharya, Naga, Ramanandi, Aughar, Avadhut, Nath Sampradaya, Gaudiya Vaisnavism.

Even though I am a Hindu by birth, it is difficult for me to understand it completely due to its complexity and variety. That's why many people, rather than taking Hinduism as a welldeveloped and ancient religion, take it as a way of life.

The complexity and variety could be simplified and systematized if we take the help of the teachings of Shankaracharya. Adi Shankaracharya established the Shanmata tradition (six-sect system) to unify Hindu worship, incorporating six major deities, whereas, in the Panchayatan pooja system he popularized only five deities leaving apart Skanda.

Shankaracharya believed that ultimate reality is formless, changeless, and non-dual. This is '*Brahman*' and all deities are different forms of that '*par-brahman*'. This unification process was well deserved at a time when Shaivas, Vaishnavas, Shakts, Ganapatyas, and Sauryas had clashed over the supremacy of their gods. Adi Shankaracharya made it clear that *Par-brahma* is formless and all other gods are offshoots of *par-brahma*, making all Panchayatan gods on an equal platform thereby ending the clashes and unifying the religion. Even today, we accept only those forms of gods who fall within these Panchayatan gods or their incarnations.



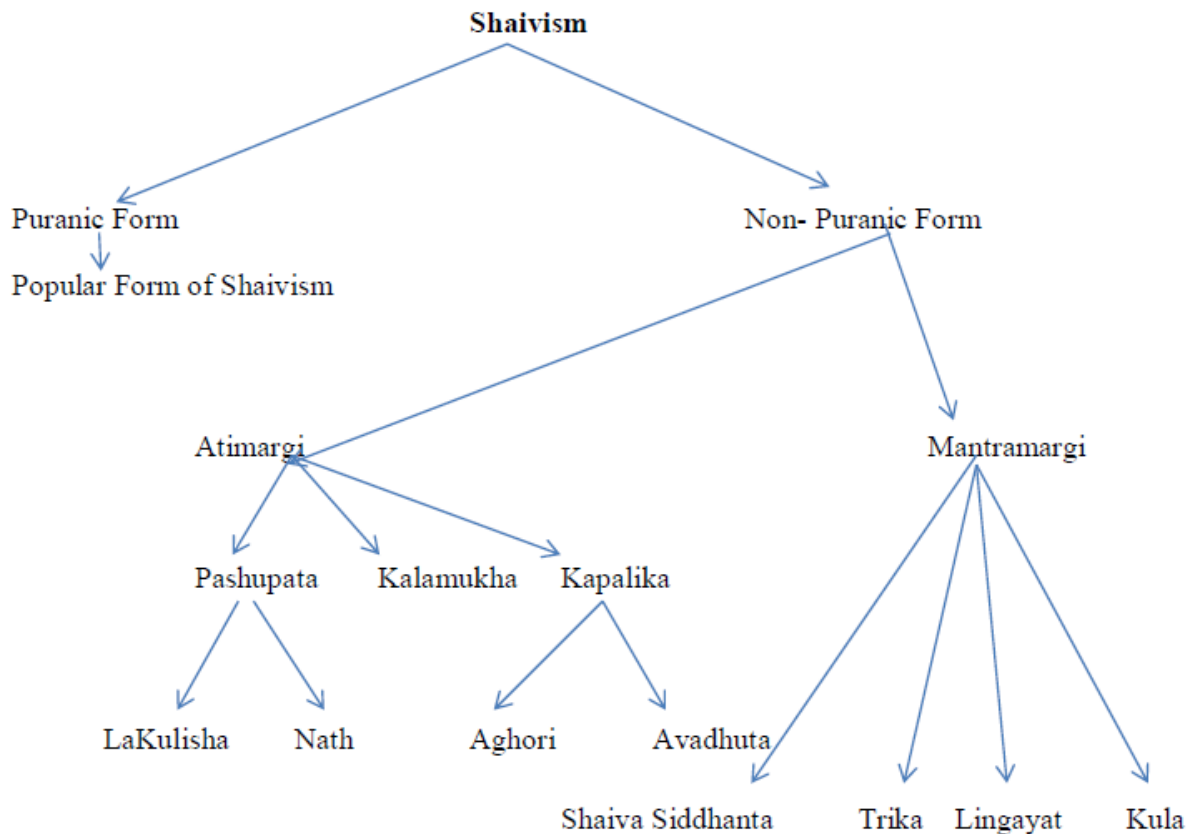
Parabrahman is formless, changeless, and non-dual (advaita). Shankaracharya believed that the individual soul (*atman*) and *Parabrahman* are not separate; they are one. According to his philosophy, the entire world is an illusion, or Maya. This understanding forms the foundation of the advaita philosophy propounded by Adi Shankaracharya. The deities we worship, including Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Ganapati, and Surya, are different manifestations of that formless *Parabrahman*. By exploring these five forms of *Parabrahman* and their various incarnations, we can gain a deeper understanding of Hinduism.

Shaivism

Let's begin with Shiva. The followers of Shiva are known as Shaivas. Shiva is often identified with Rudra, whose worship predates the Vedic period and likely emerges from pre-Vedic traditions. One of the earliest mentions of Rudra can be found in the Rig Veda (circa 1500 BC to 1200 BC). References to Rudra also appear in the Yajurveda (1200 BC to 800 BC) and in the Upanishads (800 BC to 200 BC), where the concept of Rudra further develops, eventually culminating in the worship of Shiva, the supreme god of Shaivism.

Originally, Rudra was associated with storms, wind, and thunder. He was feared for his fierce and unpredictable nature, capable of causing destruction. However, he was also regarded as a healer. The Rig Veda refers to him as the divine physician who could cure diseases. He was invoked for protection in battles and for the destruction of enemies. Rudra was linked to wild animals, particularly as Pashupati, a title given to Shiva. Over time, the perception of Rudra shifted from that of a wild, stormy deity to a more benevolent and supreme cosmic force.

The Puranic form of Shaivism is currently the most popular variant. During the Gupta period (320 AD - 500 AD), Purana literature flourished in India, with many of these texts featuring extensive discussions on Shaivism. This sect focuses on the worship of Shiva, primarily drawing from the Shiva Purana, Ling Purana, Skanda Purana, and Vayu Purana. In this tradition, Shiva is regarded as the supreme deity. The Puranic form fostered temple culture and pilgrimage sites such as Kedarnath and Kashi. It also influenced various sects, including Trika, Lingayat, Shaiva Siddhanta, and the Nath tradition.



(Diagrammatic representation of the development of Shaivism over time)

In contrast, the non-Puranic form of Shaivism is based on the Vedas, Upanishads, Agamas, and Tantras. Its primary goals are self-realization, yoga, and meditation, while the Puranic form emphasizes Bhakti and temple worship. The non-Puranic tradition has two subdivisions: Atimargi and Mantramargi.

Atimargi followers are typically wandering monks or sannyasis who renounce social ties in pursuit of enlightenment. They prioritize liberation (moksha) over rituals and do not engage in temple or idol worship. Instead, they seek oneness with Shiva through yoga and austerity (tapasya).

The Mantramargi Shaiva tradition emphasizes the use of mantras, rituals, and temple worship as pathways to attain moksha or siddhis. This approach allows both sannyasis and householders (grihastas) to follow the spiritual path. Practitioners utilize mantras, yantras, and pujas to connect with Shiva, integrating temple worship and idol veneration. Both liberation and siddhis are sought through this marga. Notable groups within Mantramargi include Shaiva Siddhanta, Trika, and Lingayat sects.

Pashupata Shaivism

The Pashupata sect likely predates Lakulisha, although he is considered its most significant historical proponent. This sect is mentioned in various inscriptions and texts, including the Mahabharata, Pashupata Sutras, and Pancharthabhasya by Kaundinya.

Pashupata Shaivism holds the belief in Shiva as the supreme Lord and the ultimate reality, referred to as "pati." According to this belief system, souls – termed "pasu" – are bound by "pasa," which signifies ignorance. Practitioners engaged in strict asceticism and yogic practices, emphasizing renunciation, meditation, and self-discipline. Their practices included:

Krida: Playful imitation of Shiva's divine behavior. **Karna:** Chanting Shiva's names and performing rituals. **Manana:** Deep meditation.

Upadana: Complete renunciation.

Siddhi: Attaining liberation and unity with Shiva.

Pashupata Shaivites performed ritual practices in temples and sometimes exhibited unconventional behaviors, such as loud laughter, singing, and dancing, to break free from ego and attachment.

Lakulisha Tradition

Pashupata Shaivism and Lakulisha Shaivism are closely related but have subtle distinctions. Pashupata Shaivism is a broader sect, while Lakulisha Shaivism is a specific branch of the

Pashupata tradition. In Lakulisha Shaivism, Lakulisha is recognized as the 28th incarnation of Shiva, who revived and systematized the Pashupata teachings. This form of Shaivism is centered on Lakulisha, emphasizing his role as a divine teacher.

The tradition places great importance on the guru-shishya parampara, wherein Lakulisha's followers believed that he personally transmitted sacred knowledge to them. Lakulisha Shaivism is predominantly found in Gujarat and Rajasthan, with notable temples dedicated to Lakulisha, such as the Eklingji Temple in Rajasthan. The tradition's influences and sculptures can also be seen in the Elephanta and Ellora caves.

Lakulisha is typically depicted holding a club (lakuta) and seated in meditation alongside his disciples. This tradition has influenced later Shaiva movements, including the Kapalika, Kalamukha, and Nath Sampradaya. Lakulisha Shaivism has survived into modern times and continues to exist within ascetic traditions in states like Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Karnataka.

Kapalika Tradition

Kapalika were Shaiv ascetics. They emerged during the 5th-7th century AD but were prominent between the 8th-12th centuries AD. They were active in Kashmir, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. They were notorious for their extreme ascetic practices. They performed their rituals on the cremation grounds. Their esoteric rituals allegedly included both animal and human sacrifice, though there is no evidence for the latter. They were the successors of the Pashupats, one of the earliest Shaiv sects.

Kapalikas used human skulls as begging bowls and worshipped Bhairava, a fierce manifestation of Shiva. He was often worshipped with a female consort, sometimes identified with Chamunda or other Shakti goddesses.

Kapalikas practiced self-mortification, drank intoxicants, and engaged in unconventional rituals, including sexual rites to attain siddhis (supernatural powers). They followed esoteric Shaiv tantras, distinct from mainstream Vedic rituals. They ate and drank from human skulls, remained naked, ate the flesh of the dead, smeared with ashes of corpses, and frequented cremation grounds.

By the 13th century, this sect declined due to more structured Shaiva sects like Vaishnavs and Nath Yogis, integration of their practices into Shaiva Siddhanta tradition, and criticism of orthodox Hindus and Buddhists. Kapalikas, however, influenced Aghoris, although they did not follow all Kapalika traditions.

Kalamukha Shaivism

Kalamukha Shaivism is an offshoot of the Pashupata sect that emerged and thrived between the 8th and 13th centuries AD in the regions of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Practitioners of this sect were semi-ascetic and embraced tantric and esoteric forms of Shaivism. They participated in ritual worship, mantra recitation, and meditation.

The Kalamukhas were associated with Veer Shaivism and the Kapalikas but were considered less extreme than the Kapalikas. While they did incorporate human skulls into their rituals, they did so with fewer obsessions than the Kapalikas.

The sect was politically organized and maintained its own land armies. However, after the 13th century, the Kalamukha sect began to decline as Veer Shaivism (the Lingayat movement) and Sringeri Advaita gained prominence.

Nath Sampradaya

The Nath Sampradaya is closely associated with Shaivism, as they worship Shiva as Adi Yogi. This tradition emerged and gained prominence between the 9th and 12th centuries AD. Its founder is Matsyendra Nath, while the most prominent Nath yogi is Gorakh Nath. The teachings of Matsyendra Nath are central to their beliefs. Notably, the current Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, belongs to this sampradaya.

The Nath Sampradaya combines concepts from Buddhism, Shaivism, Tantra, and Yoga. They believe that all creation emerges from sound (nada), light, and Shiva. They adhere to the Advaita philosophy for liberation, which posits that the soul merges with Shiva. Their practices include various magical traditions such as Tantra (sorcery), Mantra (spells), Siddha (yoga), Pranayama, Alchemy, Hatha Yoga, Kundalini awakening, Shiva worship, and mantra chanting.

Additionally, they embrace renunciation and asceticism. Many Nath yogis live in caves, forests, or temples, engaging in rigorous austerities and some incorporate Aghori elements into their practices. Key texts in their tradition include the Goraksha Samhita and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. The Nath Sampradaya has had a significant influence in regions such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Nepal.

Aghoris

Aghoris were the only surviving sect of the Kapalika and Kalamukha tradition, which originated in Medieval India during the 7th and 8th century AD and flourished during the 9th to 14th century AD. They were simple and non-discriminatory and devotees of Lord Shiva.

Aghoris lived in places like crematoriums and did sadhana in their unique way. They lived away from society and used human skulls as food bowls (symbolizing the life and death cycle), smearing their bodies with ashes from the dead. Hinglaj Mata is the Kuldevi of Aghoris. They seek liberation from rebirth by transcending the boundaries of good and evil, purity and impurity, life and death. They did radical and tantric practices such as worship of fierce deities, use of intoxicants, and performance of sacrificial rites. Aghori tradition was founded by Keenaram (b. 17th century AD) in north India. He codified the principles and practices of Aghori Panth in his books.

Avadhut

The concept of the Avadhut dates back to a period between 1000 BC and 300 BC. It is mentioned in both the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (circa 800 BC - 500 BC) and the Jabala Upanishad from the 3rd century AD. An Avadhut is described as a liberated being who transcends conventional rules, with roots in the Upanishads and an evolution through Shaiva and tantric traditions. Avadhuts renounce worldly attachments and desires.

The ideal of the Avadhut has inspired various spiritual movements, including Pashupat Shaivism, the Kapalika sects, and Nath yogis, all of which emphasize extreme asceticism and non-conformity. This influence also extended to the Bhakti and Sufi movements between the 13th and 17th centuries AD. Dattatreya is considered the central figure of the Avadhut tradition. In modern times, figures such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Bhagwan Nityanand, and Neem Karoli Baba are recognized as contemporary examples of Avadhuts.

Avadhuts reject societal conventions, choosing instead to live spontaneously and freely. They embrace the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta and identify with Shiva as Bhairava in the tantric tradition and with Dattatreya in the Bhakti tradition. Their lifestyle often involves wandering, solitude, or

residing in cremation grounds, and they may wear minimal or no clothing at all. Their behavior can be unpredictable; some express seemingly erratic actions (unmated vritti) to demonstrate their detachment from ego and social norms. While strict Avadhuts are rare today, their ideals persist in the Nath tradition, among Vedantic monks, and in the teachings of various Bhakti saints. The ultimate goal for these beings is sahaj Samadhi (effortless liberation); and complete unity with the divine, a state achieved without rigid practices.

Shaiva Siddhanta

Shaiva Siddhanta is one of the oldest and most systematic schools of Shaivism, which began to take shape between the 5th and 9th centuries AD. This tradition is more structured and devotional, emphasizing temple worship, rituals, and ethical living. In contrast, Pashupat Shaivism is an early ascetic sect that focuses on extreme renunciation and personal austerities to achieve liberation.

Shaiva Siddhanta is a dualistic tradition that is prominent in Tamil Nadu. It regards Shiva as the supreme deity, with liberation attained through divine grace. The significant texts associated with this tradition are the 'Trimurai' and the 'Agams'.

Shaiva Siddhanta distinguishes between three fundamental realities: pati (Shiva), pashu (the soul), and pash (bondage). Pati represents Shiva; the supreme soul is real but depends on Shiva and Pasha. Pash (bondage) is comprised of karma and ignorance. According to this tradition, the path to liberation includes four practices: charya (service), which involves ritual worship and temple services; kriya (devotional practices and mantras); yoga (meditation and attaining Shiva consciousness); and jnana (wisdom leading to liberation).

Furthermore, Shaiva Siddhanta emphasizes temple rituals, community life, moral discipline, vegetarianism, and a structured lineage of gurus. This tradition continues to thrive today, especially among Tamil Shaivites.

Trika Sampradaya

Trika Sampradaya, also known as Kashmir Shaivism, emerged during the 8th to 9th centuries AD. The foundation of this philosophy was laid by Vasugupta, who discovered the Shiv Sutras in the 9th century AD. This school of thought is characterized by its non-dualistic approach to tantric Shaivism and evolved from earlier Shaiva traditions, as well as influences from Tantra and Buddhism.

Trika Sampradaya emphasizes the direct realization of one's divine nature. It integrates three key elements: Shiva (pure consciousness), Shakti (divine energy), and Anu (the individual soul). Liberation, or *pratyabhijna*, occurs when one recognizes that they are already Shiva. This realization can happen suddenly, without the need for extensive spiritual discipline.

According to this philosophy, Shiva manifests the universe through five divine powers. Reality is viewed as dynamic, or pulsating (*spanda*), between Shiva and Shakti, which serves as the source of both creation and dissolution. The system provides four methods to attain realization, and a realized guru can transmit divine grace (*shaktipata*) to awaken a disciple instantly.

Kula Sampradaya

Kula Sampradaya, also known as Kaulmarga, emerged between the 8th and 12th centuries AD in regions such as Kashmir, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. However, it largely disappeared in the 13th century due to Islamic invasions and the suppression of esoteric practices.

Kula Shaivism represents a unique blend of Tantra, Shaivism, and Shaktism, making it one of the most esoteric and mystical traditions within Indian spirituality. Unlike some Shaiva traditions that focus solely on Shiva, Kula Shaivism emphasizes the inseparable unity of Shiva (Consciousness) and

Shakti (energy). Central to this practice is the worship of divine couples (yugal sadhana), such as Bhairava and Bhairavi.

Rather than rejecting the physical world, Kula Shaivism embraces the body as a means to attain enlightenment. This tradition involves the use of mantras, meditation, and sometimes engages in practices considered taboo, such as the consumption of wine, meat, and sexual rituals, to realize the divine in all aspects of life. A qualified guru and initiator are deemed essential for this path, as it is believed that enlightenment can occur suddenly through profound mystical experiences.

Lingayats

Lingayat, also known as Veershaivas, was founded by Basavanna in the 12th century AD in Karnataka. They advocate for social reform and worship Shiva in the form of ishta-linga. Their beliefs align with qualified monism, similar to the philosophy of Ramanuja. Lingayats aimed to combat social evils and religious hypocrisy, rejecting many traditional Vedic rituals and caste-based discrimination. They emphasize human rights and social equality, particularly for women.

Lingayats wear a small lingam on their left shoulder and have their own pilgrimage centers, religious poetry, and festivals, such as Shivratri and Ganesh Chaturthi. Even today, Lingayats remain influential in Karnataka.

Vaishnavism

Vaishnavism is a religious tradition with deep historical roots, evolving from early Vedic practices to the religious movements of the medieval period. Its development can be traced through several key stages.

During the Rig Vedic period (circa 1500 BC), Vishnu is mentioned as a minor solar deity associated with cosmic order, depicted as striding across the universe in three steps. Later Vedic texts, such as the Brahmanas and Upanishads, gradually elevate Vishnu's status by linking him to creation, preservation, and liberation.

In the epic period (500 BC to 300 AD), the Ramayana and the Mahabharata established Vishnu as the Supreme God, particularly through his avatars, Rama and Krishna. The Bhagavad Gita, which is part of the Mahabharata, presents Krishna as the ultimate divine being and emphasizes the significance of the bhakti movement.

From 300 AD to 1200 AD, during the Puranic and classical periods, texts like the Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavad Purana systematized Vaishnavite theology. Between the 6th and 9th centuries AD, the Alvars, Tamil poet-saints, spread devotion to Vishnu through emotional poetry, laying the foundation for subsequent bhakti movements. Philosophers such as Ramanuja, Madhvacharya, and Nimbarka established various theological schools within Vaishnavism.

From 1200 AD to 1700 AD, the bhakti movement flourished with saints like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and Vallabhacharya, the founder of Pushtimarga, promoting personal devotion to Krishna. During this period, Vaishnavism became deeply ingrained in Hindu religious life, influencing temple architecture, festivals, and social structures.

In modern times, from 1700 AD to the present, Vaishnavism continues to thrive through temples, pilgrimage centers, and organizations such as BAPS and ISKCON. Its influence extends beyond India, with followers worldwide practicing devotion to Vishnu, Rama, and Krishna.

In Vaishnavism, the supreme deity is Lord Vishnu, who is revered as the Supreme Being, the preserver of the universe, and the source of all creation. His several incarnations, known as the Dasavatara, are also highly venerated.

Here is the List of Dasavatar and their approximate periods:

| Sl. No. | Avatar | Traditional Epoch | Approximate Period | Notes |
|---------|-------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 1 | Matsya | Sat Yuga | >10,000 BC (mythological) | Symbolic of aquatic life; associated with flood myths |
| 2 | Kurma | Sat Yuga | >10,000 BC (mythological) | Symbol of amphibian life |
| 3 | Varaha | Sat Yuga | >10,000 BC (mythological) | Earth uplifted from waters; symbolizes early Earth concepts |
| 4 | Narasimha | Sat Yuga | >10,000 BC (mythological) | Human-lion hybrid; symbolizes the evolving man |
| 5 | Vamana | Treta Yuga | 8000–7000 BC (mythological) | Dwarf form; marks the beginning of civilization and control over land |
| 6 | Parashurama | Treta Yuga | 6000–4000 BC | Possibly a historical warrior-sage |
| 7 | Rama | Treta Yuga | 5000–3000 BC | Traditional date around 5100 BC (as per some Puranic sources) |
| 8 | Krishna | Dvapara Yuga | 3200–3100 BC | Traditional date of Mahabharata war: 3139 BC |
| 9 | Buddha | Kali Yuga | 563–483 BC | Historical figure – Siddhartha Gautama |
| 10 | Kalki | Kali Yuga (Future) | Yet to appear | Expected at the end of Kali Yuga; in the next few thousand years |

The key gods and figures in Vaishnavism are:

| Sl. No. | Deity | Role |
|---------|----------------------|---|
| 1 | Vishnu | The supreme deity, worshipped as the preserver and protector of the universe; maintains cosmic order and safeguards creation. |
| 2 | Lakshmi | Goddess of wealth, prosperity, and good fortune; often depicted as the consort of Vishnu. |
| 3 | Rama | Incarnation of Vishnu; revered as the ideal king and hero of the <i>Ramayana</i> , known for his unwavering duty and righteousness. |
| 4 | Krishna | Incarnation of Vishnu; celebrated for his divine love, the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> teachings, and his playful childhood and youth, especially with the Gopis. |
| 5 | Narayana | A cosmic form of Vishnu, often depicted reclining on the serpent Ananta, symbolizing his eternal presence in the universe. |
| 6 | Balarama | Elder brother of Krishna; worshipped in sects like the Balarama tradition within Vaishnavism. |
| 7 | Jagannath | A regional form of Krishna worshipped primarily in Odisha; associated with the famous Jagannath Temple in Puri. |
| 8 | Venkateshwara | A popular form of Vishnu worshipped mainly in southern India, especially at the Tirumala Venkateswara Temple in Andhra Pradesh. |
| 9 | Narasimha | Incarnation of Vishnu as a half-man, half-lion; appeared to protect devotee Prahlada from the demon king Hiranyakashipu. |
| 10 | Varaha | Boar incarnation of Vishnu; rescued and lifted the Earth from the cosmic ocean. |
| 11 | Parashurama | Sixth incarnation of Vishnu; depicted as a warrior with an axe, known for destroying corrupt Kshatriya rulers and restoring dharma. |
| 12 | Sita | Wife of Rama; regarded as an incarnation of Lakshmi and the embodiment of devotion, virtue, and patience. |
| 13 | Hanuman | Devotee and disciple of Rama; although considered an incarnation of Shiva, he is deeply venerated in Vaishnavism as a perfect devotee and protector of dharma. Some sects regard him as a partial avatar of Vishnu. |

| | | |
|----|--------------|--|
| 14 | Radha | Eternal consort of Krishna; regarded as the supreme goddess of love and devotion. Especially in Gaudiya Vaishnavism, she is seen as the source of all feminine divine power (<i>Shakti</i>). |
|----|--------------|--|

In addition to these figures, Rukmini (the consort of Krishna) and Tulsi (a medicinal plant and

Krishna's beloved) are highly revered in the Vaishnava tradition.

By the 8th century AD, when Shankaracharya emerged, Hinduism had developed multiple sects, each with its philosophies and deities: Shaivism (devotion to Shiva), Vaishnavism (devotion to Vishnu), Shaktism (worship of the goddess Durga), and a tantric tradition that included esoteric and mystical practices. Various local deities were worshipped across different regions, which made Hinduism highly diverse and somewhat disorganized.

Numerous darshans (schools of philosophy) existed, often contradicting one another. The Mimamsa School emphasized ritualism, while the Vedanta School centered on spiritual knowledge. Buddhists and materialist Charvakas strongly critiqued Hindu beliefs, leading to extensive debates over the nature of reality and the concept of God.

At the time Shankaracharya appeared, Hinduism required unification, philosophical clarity, and revitalization. He traveled throughout India, engaging in debates with scholars and establishing Advaita Vedanta (non-dualism), which restructured Hinduism into a more coherent, philosophical, and devotional tradition.

Advaita Vedanta teaches that *Brahman* (absolute reality) is non-dual and that individual souls are ultimately one with *Brahman*. This perspective contrasts with Vaishnavite schools that emphasize a personal deity (Vishnu/Krishna) and maintain a distinction between God and the soul.

Shankaracharya's influence extended to later Vaishnavite thinkers such as Ramanuja (Sri Vaishnavism) and Madhvacharya (Dwaita Vedanta), who developed their theological frameworks partly in response to Shankar's *Advaita*, placing a greater emphasis on devotion (*bhakti*) rather than non-dual realization. While Shankaracharya did not establish a Vaishnavite sect, his work significantly influenced Hindu traditions, including Vaishnavism.

Vaishnavism encompasses several sects, each with its own distinct philosophies, practices, and interpretations. The major sects can be organized based on their theological foundations and historical development. Four principal Vaishnavite sects were formalized during the medieval period, each led by a notable philosopher.

1. **Sri Vaishnavism:** The founder of Sri Vaishnavism, also known as the Ramanuja Sampradaya, was Ramanuja (1017 AD - 1137 AD). His philosophy is known as *Vishisht-Advait*, or qualified non-dualism. He believed that the soul and God are distinct yet connected. Followers worship Vishnu and Lakshmi as Narayan, and the prominent centers of this tradition are Srirangam and Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu.
2. **Madhava Vaishnavism:** This tradition is also known as the Brahma Sampradaya. Its founder, Madhavacharya (1238 AD - 1317 AD), introduced the philosophy of *Dvait*, or dualism. In this view, God and souls are eternally separate. The main deities of this tradition are Vishnu, particularly in the form of Krishna, and its prominent center is Udupi in Karnataka.
3. **Nimbarka Sampradaya:** Founded by Nimbarkacharya in the 12th century AD, the Nimbarka Sampradaya, also called the Sanaka Sampradaya, follows a philosophy known as *Dvait-Advait*, or dualistic non-dualism. Adherents believe that the soul is distinct from yet dependent on Vishnu. They worship Radha and Krishna, with their prominent centers located in Rajasthan and Vrindavan.

4. **Vallabh Vaishnavism:** Vallabh Vaishnavism, also known as the Rudra Sampradaya, was founded by Vallabhacharya (1479 AD - 1531 AD). He adhered to the philosophy of *ShuddhaAdvait*, or pure non-dualism, which posits that everything is a divine manifestation of Krishna.

Followers worship Krishna as Shri Nathji. Key centers of this tradition are found in Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Mathura. Vallabhacharya emphasized that the path to liberation involves a combination of knowledge, devotion, and action, with devotion expressed through rituals, temple worship, and social duties.

Other important Vaishnavite Traditions are:

Gaudiya Vaishnavism: Gaudiya Vaishnavism was founded by Chaitanya Maha Prabhu (1486 AD - 1534 AD) and emphasizes the worship of Krishna, Balarama, and Radha, following Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's teachings. It originated in Bengal and Orissa during the 16th century and has since spread worldwide, notably through the efforts of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness). Practitioners engage in Kirtan (devotional singing), Japa (chanting mantras on beads), and deity worship (of Krishna, Balarama, Radha, and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu). They adhere to four regulative principles: no meat-eating, no intoxication, no gambling, and no illicit sex.

Within Gaudiya Vaishnavism exists a subgroup known as the Sahajiya Sampradaya, which draws from Chaitanya Maha Prabhu's teachings. However, mainstream Gaudiya Vaishnavism has rejected it as heretical. The Sahajiyas internalized Chaitanya's ecstatic bhakti and extended it into esoteric mysticism, focusing on inner realization and mystical experiences rather than external rituals. They believe that the divine union of Radha and Krishna symbolizes the inner union of the soul with the divine.

Another tradition within Gaudiya Vaishnavism is the Sakhi Bhava, where devotees, including men, adopt the mood of Radha's female companions (Sakhis) to better serve and please Krishna. This practice is more common among certain ascetics or renunciants, particularly those who identify with manjari bhava. It is especially prevalent in Vrindavan and Nabadwip.

Ramanandi Sampradaya: Founded by Ramananda in the 14th century AD, the Ramanandi Sampradaya is one of the largest Vaishnava sects, emphasizing bhakti (devotion) as the primary path to liberation. Their principal deity is Lord Ram, with worship also directed towards Sita, Hanuman, and Lakshmi. This sect includes the largest group of Hindu sadhus (ascetics), including Nagas, who adhere to its teachings. Key centers for the sect are located in Ayodhya, Varanasi, and Chitrakoot. Tulsidas, a prominent Ramanandi saint from the 16th century, is celebrated for his work, the **Ram Charitmanas**. Naga Sadhus from the Ramanandi Sampradaya are considered Hindu warriors who historically protected Hindu temples.

Swaminarayan Sampradaya: Established by Swaminarayan in the 18th century, the Swaminarayan Sampradaya regards him as a manifestation of Purushottam (the Supreme God) and worships him as Bhagwan Swaminarayan. The sect promotes devotion to Vishnu, particularly Krishna and Ram. Over time, Swaminarayan became recognized as Purushottam by his followers. The sect has built six major temples in Gujarat and has established worship of Nar Narayan and Lakshmi Narayan. BAPS (Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha) is a notable sect within the Swaminarayan movement.

Pushtimarg: Founded by Vallabhacharya, Pushtimarg is a sub-sect of Vallabh Vaishnavism that emphasizes Krishna's grace as the key to liberation rather than individual effort. Adherents believe that bhakti alone leads to liberation, focusing on Pushti bhakti (spontaneous, unconditional devotion) which

involves serving Krishna in personal shrines. This sect places a significant emphasis on Krishna's childhood form, known as Balkrishna.

Radha Vallabh Sampradaya: The Radha Vallabh Sampradaya is a Vaishnavite sect that centers on the worship of Radha as the supreme deity, with Krishna as her consort. Founded by Hit Harivansh (1502-1552), a saint-poet from Vrindavan, the sect holds that Radha's love represents the highest form of divine realization. Radha is considered the ultimate reality,

'Swayam Bhagwati,' while Krishna is believed to exist solely to serve her divine love. The sect emphasizes Prem Bhakti, or pure, selfless love for Radha and Krishna. The main center of worship is the Radha Vallabh temple in Vrindavan, built in the 16th century, which uniquely does not contain an idol of Krishna; instead, it features only his symbolic crown or flute. Bhajan and Kirtan are the primary forms of worship in this sampradaya.

Haridasi Sampradaya: Founded by Swami Haridas in the 16th century, the Haridasi Sampradaya is known for its emphasis on the worship of Krishna in his Madhurya (sweet) aspect. Haridas, a saint, poet, and musician from Vrindavan, is believed to be the incarnation of Lalita Sakhi, a companion of Radha. In this sampradaya, both Radha and Krishna are considered equally important, and adherents believe in Shuddhaadvait (pure non-dualism). The main center for this sect is the Banke Bihari temple in Vrindavan.

Mahanubhav Sect: Founded by Chakradhar Swami in the 13th century in Maharashtra, the Mahanubhav sect emphasizes devotion to Krishna and promotes a simple ethical way of life. This sect exclusively worships Krishna and rejects all other gods and goddesses, advocating for monotheism and the importance of the guru for spiritual guidance. They do not believe in idol worship and have a significant following in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh.

Shaktiism

Shaktism has ancient origins and has developed over thousands of years. It began with the worship of the Mother Goddess during the Prehistoric and Vedic periods (before 1500 BC), traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization (2500 BC - 1500 BC), where terracotta figurines of female deities were discovered. The Rigveda (1500 BC) mentions divine feminine forces such as Usha (dawn), Aditi (Cosmic Mother), and Vac (speech). The 'Devi Sukam' recognizes Devi as the supreme cosmic power.

During the Epic and Puranic Development period (500 BC - 500 AD), texts like the Mahabharata and Ramayana introduced key figures such as Durga, Kali, and Yogmaya, marking the rise of Shakti worship. **The Devi Mahatmya** (circa 400 AD - 600 AD) in the Markandeya Purana establishes Devi's supremacy as she defeats demons like Mahishasura.

In the Gupta Period (300 AD - 600 AD), temples dedicated to Durga, Kali, and Lakshmi began to emerge. From 600 AD to 1200 AD, Tantric rituals and mantra worship developed, with sects like Kaula and Sri Vidya flourishing, and the Shakta Puranas being composed.

The Medieval Period and Bhakti influences (1200 AD - 1800 AD) saw Shaktism gain traction in regions such as Bengal, Assam, Orissa, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. In the 19th century, Ramakrishna Paramahansa revived Kali worship, establishing several Shakti Peethas across India.

In the modern era (1800 AD to present), Shaktism influenced the freedom movement, with figures like Bankim Chandra incorporating Devi imagery in "Vande Mataram." Today, Shaktism remains vibrant, celebrated through festivals such as Durga Puja, Lakshmi Puja, Kali Puja, and Navratri. Throughout its history, Shaktism has adapted over time, merging Vedic, Tantric, and Bhakti traditions while continuing to shape Hindu spirituality.

Key aspects of Shakti-ism are:

| Sl. No. | Heads | Descriptions |
|---------|----------------------|--|
| 1 | Primary Deity | Shakti/Devi manifests as Durga, Kali, Parvati, Lakshmi, Saraswati, among other forms. |
| 2 | Philosophy | Often rooted in <i>Advaita</i> (non-dualism) or <i>Tantric</i> traditions, emphasizing that Shakti and Shiva are inseparable aspects of the same ultimate reality. |
| 3 | Practices | Includes worship through <i>Yantra</i> , <i>Mantra</i> , <i>Tantra</i> , <i>Kundalini</i> practices, and major rituals like <i>Durga Puja</i> . |
| 4 | Sacred Texts | Key texts include the <i>Devi Mahatmyam</i> (part of the <i>Markandeya Purana</i>), <i>Devi Bhagavata Purana</i> , and various <i>Tantras</i> . |
| 5 | Regions | Predominantly practiced in West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and parts of Southeast Asia. |

Shaktiism is closely linked to Tantra and emphasizes the power of transformation and liberation through devotion to the Goddess. There are several sects of Shaktiism, each with distinct beliefs, deities, and practices. Four major sects of Shakti-ism are:

| Sl. No. | Kula | Goddesses | Emphasizes On | Regions |
|---------|--|---|---|---|
| 1 | Sri Kula (<i>Lakshmi-oriented</i>) | Lakshmi, Tripura Sundari (Shodashi), Raj Rajeshwari | Auspiciousness, beauty, grace, and prosperity. Practices include <i>Sri Vidya Upasana</i> and worship of the <i>Sri Chakra</i> . | Tamil Nadu, Kerala |
| 2 | Kali Kula (<i>Kali-oriented</i>) | Kali, Bhairavi, and other fierce forms | Destruction of evil, time, and transcendence. Follows tantric rituals, <i>smashana sadhana</i> (cremation ground practices), and intense spiritual disciplines. | West Bengal, Assam, Odisha |
| 3 | Tara Kula (<i>Tara-oriented</i>) | Tara | Wisdom, compassion, and liberation. Closely linked to <i>Vajrayana Tantra</i> (Tibetan Buddhism); involves secretive tantric rites and mantra-based practices. | Eastern India, Himalayan regions – West Bengal, Assam, Nepal, Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan |
| 4 | Bhairava Kula (<i>Bhairava-Bhairavi</i>) | Bhairavi and Bhairava | Transformation, Kundalini awakening, and esoteric worship. Associated with <i>Kaula</i> tradition where Shiva and Shakti are worshipped together. | Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Assam, Bengal, Nepal, Varanasi |

Other Regional and Folk Traditions

| Sl. No. | Tradition | Goddess(es) | Emphasizes On | Regions |
|---------|---------------------------|---|---|--|
| 5 | Kamakhya Tradition | Goddess Kamakhya | Linked to fertility, mysticism, and <i>yonitrantra</i> . | Assam |
| 6 | Matrika Worship | Sapta/Ashta Matrikas (Seven/Eight Mother Goddesses) | Associated with protection, destruction of evil, and maintenance of cosmic order. Seen as <i>shaktis</i> of Shiva and Vishnu. | Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Nepal |

| | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| 7 | Gram-devata/Devi Worship | Village goddesses | Ensuring village protection, social harmony, and local identity. | Rural India across various states |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------|--|-----------------------------------|

Goddesses in Shakti-ism

Devi is the supreme power manifested in various forms:

1. **Adi Shakti:** Adi Shakti, also known as Mahadevi, is the supreme Goddess and the ultimate reality in Shakti-ism. She is formless but takes on many divine forms to interact with the world.
2. **Tridevi:** The Tridevi represents three primary forms of major female deities:

Saraswati: Associated with Brahma (the Creator), she embodies wisdom and learning.

Lakshmi: Linked to Vishnu (the Preserver), she signifies wealth and prosperity. Parvati: Connected to Shiva, she represents power and transformation.

3. **The Ten Mahavidyas:** The Ten Mahavidyas are the tantric wisdom goddesses, with "Mahavidyas" meaning "great wisdom." These ten fierce and mystical forms of goddesses each represent different aspects of power and knowledge.

1. Ten Mahavidyas (Aspects of Power & Knowledge)

| Sl. No. | Name | Aspects of Power & Knowledge |
|---------|----------------------------|--|
| 1 | Kali | Destroyer of evil and time |
| 2 | Tara | Compassion and liberation |
| 3 | Tripura Sundari / Shodashi | Beauty and bliss of the three worlds |
| 4 | Bhuvaneshwari | Queen of the universe; sustains reality |
| 5 | Bhairavi | Fierce form; destruction and inner awakening |
| 6 | Chhinnamasta | Self-decapitated; symbolizes sacrifice and spiritual transformation |
| 7 | Dhumavati | Widow goddess; detachment, void, and transcendence |
| 8 | Baglamukhi | Paralyzes enemies; controls power and speech |
| 9 | Matangi | Outcaste goddess; represents unconventional wisdom, arts, and speech |
| 10 | Kamala | Tantric Lakshmi; bestows spiritual and material prosperity |

2. Warrior and Fierce Goddesses

| Sl. No. | Name | Description |
|---------|----------|---|
| 1 | Durga | Warrior goddess who slays demons like Mahishasura |
| 2 | Kali | Dark, fierce goddess of time, death, and transformation |
| 3 | Chamunda | Terrifying form who killed demons Chand and Mund |
| 4 | Bhairavi | Associated with Tantra; destroys ignorance through devotion |

3. Benevolent and Motherly Forms

| Sl. No. | Name | Description |
|---------|-----------|--|
| 1 | Annapurna | Provider of food, nourishment, and care |
| 2 | Gayatri | Embodiment of divine wisdom and mantra power |
| 3 | Lalita | Goddess of beauty, grace, and supreme bliss |

4. Regional and Folk Goddesses

| Sl. No. | Name | Region | Description |
|---------|---------------------|----------------|---|
| 1 | Kamakhya | Assam | Tantric goddess of fertility and mysticism |
| 2 | Meenakshi | Tamil Nadu | Warrior goddess and queen of Madurai |
| 3 | Mariamman | South India | Goddess of rain, health, and protection from disease |
| 4 | Kanyaka Parmeshwari | Andhra Pradesh | Associated with trade, prosperity, and community well-being |

5. Saptamatrikas / Ashtamatrikas (Seven/Eight Divine Mothers)

| Sl. No. | Name | Shakti of |
|---------|------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Brahmani | Brahma |
| 2 | Vaishnavi | Vishnu |
| 3 | Maheshwari | Shiva |
| 4 | Indrani | Indra |
| 5 | Kaumari | Kartikeya |
| 6 | Varahi | Varaha |
| 7 | Chamunda | Fierce aspect of Durga |
| 8 | Narasimhi | Narasimha; ferocity and protection |

Matrikas are worshipped in Shakti Peethas, tantric rituals, and village shrines throughout India and Nepal. They are associated with tantric sadhana, the awakening of kundalini, and protection from evil forces.

There are 64 Yoginis, a group of powerful tantric goddesses in Shaktism, who are revered for their occult powers, transformative abilities, and divine wisdom. They are linked with Shiva, Devi, and the Matrikas, and are believed to be forms of Shakti that control cosmic energies.

The Yoginis are worshipped for their supernatural powers (Siddhis), spiritual liberation (moksha), and protection. Each Yogini has specific mantras, yantras, and mudras associated with them that are used in tantra. Their temples are unique, often characterized as circular open-air structures. These can be found across India, particularly in Hirapua and Ranipur (both in Orissa), Khajuraho (Madhya Pradesh), and Jabalpur (Madhya Pradesh). These temples were historically used for tantric rituals, secret initiations, and esoteric practices.

Yoginis are also mentioned in the Devi Mahatamya, where they assist the goddess in her battles against demons. They are considered semi-divine tantric deities or celestial attendants of the goddesses. Some well-known Yoginis include Mahamaya, Vajreshwari, Bhairavi, Chhinamasta, and Dhumavati.

Ganpatya

Ganpatya venerates Lord Ganesh as the supreme deity or ultimate reality (*Par Brahman*). This sect flourished between the 6th and 9th centuries AD, integrating elements of Vedanta, Tantra, and Bhakti to offer a unique path to spiritual enlightenment. However, its prominence declined over time.

The worship of Ganesh traces back to the Vedic period, with references found in the Rig Veda, where he is invoked as the leader of celestial beings. The formal rise of the Ganpatya sect occurred during the Gupta period, from the 4th to the 6th century AD, and gained recognition during the Shankaracharya era in the 8th century AD. During this time, philosophical texts established Ganesh as the Supreme God. Major temples and pilgrimage centers were built, particularly in Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. By the medieval period, the Smart tradition absorbed the Ganpatya sect,

leading to its decline as a separate movement. Despite this, its popularity grew, especially with the celebration of *Ganesh Chaturthi* popularized by Lokmanya Tilak.

In the Ganpatya tradition, Ganesh is regarded as the Supreme Being (Par Brahman). In mainstream Hinduism, Ganesh is often perceived as a remover of obstacles or a minor deity. However, in the Ganpatya sect, he is attributed absolute divine power. The Ganapati Atharvashirsha states: "*tvameva pratyaksham brahmasi*" (you alone are the visible Brahman) and "*tvameva sarvam khalvidam brahmasi*" (you alone are everything in the universe). This Advaitic philosophy suggests that all existence is a manifestation of Ganesh's consciousness. Ganpatya's philosophy assigns deep metaphysical significance to Ganesh's physical attributes. His elephant head symbolizes divine wisdom, large ears represent the ability to listen to the prayers of all, the broken tusk signifies the sacrifice of ego and imperfection, the trunk embodies flexibility and adaptability, and the mouse symbolizes mastery over worldly desires.

Ganpatya believes in eight incarnations of Ganesh. The Mudgal Purana describes these eight divine forms, each representing different aspects of the cosmos:

| Sl. No. | Name | Aspects |
|---------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Vakratunda | Destroyer of arrogance |
| 2 | Ekdanta | Sacrifice and wisdom |
| 3 | Mahodara | Preserver of universal balance |
| 4 | Gajanana | Protector of righteousness |
| 5 | Lambodar | Symbol of cosmic energy |
| 6 | Vikata | Force of Transformation |
| 7 | Vighnaraja | Remover of obstacles |
| 8 | Dhumravarna | Dissolver of Karmic impurities |

Ganpatya practices intense devotion (bhakti yoga) to Ganesh. Key practices in Ganpatya include the chanting of the Ganapati Atharvashirsha (to invoke his supreme presence), the Ganapati homam (fire ritual) for wisdom and prosperity, and the Ganesh Chaturthi festival, which involves the worship of Ganesh idols. They believe that the path of knowledge (Jnana) and the worship of Ganesh ultimately serve as means to transcend ego and attain liberation. They have also incorporated Tantric elements, viewing Ganesh as a guardian of mystical knowledge.

Major centers of Ganpatya worship include:

1. **Ashta Vinayaka Temples** (Maharashtra) include eight sacred temples each housing a unique form of Ganesh for example:
 - a. Mayureshwar Temple (Moregaon): central temple of ashta vinayaka.
 - b. Siddhivinayak temple (Siddhatek) associated with spiritual success (iii) Chintamani temple (Theur): worshipped for peace and wisdom
2. Siddhivinayak Temple (Mumbai): Rich and famous.
3. **Kanipakam Vinayak Temple** (Andhra Pradesh): Swayambhu temple, grow in size over time.
4. **Ucchi Pillayar Temple** (Tamil Nadu): This Ganesh temple is associated with the Ramayan.

The Ganpatya sect began to decline in the medieval period due to the rise of the Smart tradition and the spread of Vaishnavism and Shaivism. However, the celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi led to a revival of Ganesha worship. Nowadays, the Ganpatya sect no longer functions as a separate sect.

Suryaism

The Suryaism sect is centered on the worship of Surya, the Sun. Numerous hymns dedicated to Surya, referring to him as Savitar, Mitra, and Aditya, can be found in the Rig Veda. The Gayatri Mantra serves as a prayer to the Sun, seeking wisdom and enlightenment. Over time, various dynasties, such as Ikshavaku, Harishchandra, and Ram, claimed descent from him. A powerful hymn known as the Aditya Hridayam is found in the Ramayana and was imparted to Ram by Rishi Agastya, highlighting the divine power of Surya.

In Suryaism, Surya is regarded as the supreme cosmic power, referred to as Param Brahman (Supreme God). This philosophy, known as Jyoti Tattava (the philosophy of light), symbolizes truth, wisdom, and enlightenment. Surya is viewed as the sustainer of the dharma chakra and teaches that human beings should live in harmony with the natural order. The Surya Dharma (solar path) emphasizes a disciplined approach to life. Suryaism believes that everyone possesses an atma-jyoti (inner sun), and spiritual growth involves awakening this inner light.

The scriptures of Suryaism include:

1. Rig Veda – hymns dedicated to Surya
2. Gayatri Mantra – foundational chant of Suryaism
3. Aditya Hridayam – emphasizing Surya's power
4. Surya Upanishad – Upanishadic text dedicated to the Sun
5. Surya Purana – text detailing Surya-centric teachings, history, and philosophy

Key symbols and iconography include:

1. Surya Chakra – a 12-rayed sun disc representing the 12 months and cosmic cycles
2. Jyoti Lingam – a pillar of light representing Surya's divine energy
3. Seven Horses and Chariots – symbolizing the Sun's cosmic motion and energy
4. Golden Swastika – a symbol of the Sun's creative power

Worship and rituals are performed on a daily, weekly, and annual basis:

Daily Practices:

1. Surya Arghya – offered every morning
2. Surya Namaskar – a form of sun salutation
3. Chanting the Gayatri Mantra

Weekly Practices:

1. Sunday fasting – observed with prayers and meditation

Annual Festivals:

1. Makar Sankranti – celebrating the Sun's northward movement
2. Rath Saptami – symbolizing the birth of Surya
3. Chhath Puja – a major festival dedicated to Sun worship

Temples and Sacred Sites:

1. Konark Sun Temple (Orissa) – a grand chariot structure
2. Modhera Sun Temple (Gujarat) – aligned with the Sun's movements

3. Deo Sun Temple (Aurangabad, Bihar) – built between the 8th and 13th centuries AD
4. Surya Mandir (Nalanda, BiharShariff) – constructed in the 8th to 12th centuries AD 5. Surya Mandir at Arasavalli (Andhra Pradesh) – a continuous center for Sun puja

By the medieval period, Vaishnavism and Shaivism became dominant and destruction of temples during Muslim invasions and merger of Surya worship with other traditions led to the decline of Sun sect. However, the practices of Surya worship are still followed in all forms.

Smartism

Smartism is a liberal sect of Hinduism that allows followers to worship multiple gods, emphasizing the oneness of *Brahman* and the various deities as its manifestations. It is associated with the teachings of Adi Shankaracharya and focuses on five main deities: Ganesh, Shiva, Shakti, Vishnu, and Surya.

This non-sectarian approach to worship and philosophy promotes *jnana* (knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion), and *karma* (action) as paths to liberation. While the tradition was systematized by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th century AD, its roots can be traced back to earlier Vedic traditions, where Hindu worship was broadly inclusive and centered on Vedic deities like Agni, Indra, Surya, and Varuna.

Shankaracharya organized Hindu worship into a system called Shanmata (six-fold worship), which included six principal deities: Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Ganesh, Surya, and Kartikeya. This system encourages individuals to choose their *ishta-devta* (personal deity) while respecting others, maintaining that all deities are expressions of the same divine principle, *Brahman*.

The philosophy of Smartism is deeply rooted in Advaita Vedanta, which posits that the Supreme Reality is Brahman – formless, infinite, and beyond human perception. The world is viewed as 'Maya' (illusion), and individual souls are not separate from Brahman. Liberation is attained through Gyaan (knowledge), Bhakti (devotion), and Karma (action), and the practice encourages the personal choice of a deity (ishta-devta).

Sacred Texts of Smartism:

1. Vedas: Cosmic hymns, rituals, and philosophical teachings.
2. Upanishads: Teachings on non-duality.
3. Bhagavad Gita: Outlines Gyaan, Bhakti, and Karma as paths for liberation.
4. Brahma Sutra: Explores Vedanta philosophy, the nature of Brahman, and paths to attain it.
5. Smritis: Such as Manusmriti.

Temples:

1. Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu): Associated with Adi Shankaracharya.
2. Shringeri Sharda Peetham (Karnataka): The first of the four-maths established by Adi Shankaracharya.
3. Chidambaram Nataraja (Tamil Nadu): Primarily a Shiva temple, it reflects Advait philosophy.

Daily Worship and Rituals:

1. Panchayatan Puja: Worship of all five deities—Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Surya, and Ganesh—together. It is performed using five idols placed in a specific geometric design, symbolizing the unity of divine forces.
2. Sandhyavandanam: Vedic rituals performed three times a day.

3. Gyaan Yagna: A study of scriptures, including the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.
4. Festivals: Celebrating Holi, Diwali, Navratri, Shivratri, and Chhath with equal reverence to all deities.

Smartism is a comprehensive, inclusive, and philosophical approach to Hinduism, reflecting the richness, diversity, and vastness of the Hindu tradition.

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