

Key concepts

- Many Hindus understand the concept of Brahman Saguna through the Trimurti. The three gods of the Trimurti are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and are regarded as different aspects of God – Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer. This can be seen in representations of the Trimurti as one God with three heads. In this respect they also represent earth, water and fire. Hindus see time as being cyclical and the Trimurti expresses this understanding.
- They also represent the three gunas, the three strands of life: Vishnu, the sattva guna; Shiva, the tamas guna; and Brahma, the rajas guna.
- Brahma is the creator of the universe and is usually depicted as a man with four heads, four faces and four arms. Hindus believe that Brahma after the end of each universe meditates before creating the next.
- Vishnu is known as the preserver both in the cosmic sense of preserving the universe as it should be and in a personal sense in the preservation of dharma. Vishnu is frequently presented in blue to represent his all-pervading nature.
- The third member of the Trimurti is Shiva who is the god of destruction. This must be understood in the context of Hinduism's cyclic understanding of life: in order to move through successive rebirths the atman must die and death is as important in the cycle of life as birth. However, he is also regarded as the creator following destruction. Shiva is the god of opposites, creator and destroyer, old and young, fierce and gentle and as Ardhanarishwara both man and woman.
- Vaishnavism is a branch of Hinduism that worships Vishnu or one of his avatars as the Supreme God. The worship of Vishnu can be traced back to Vedic times and is principally monotheistic with aspects that can be argued as pantheistic. Vaishnavites believe that all other gods serve Vishnu.
- Shaivism is the branch of Hinduism that worships Shiva as the Supreme God. Shaivas acknowledge the existence of other gods but only as expression of the Supreme God. Shaivas believe that God cannot be limited to any form or body and that is why Shiva is often worshipped in the form of a linga which symbolises the entire universe.

Key quotes

"There must be some doubt as to whether the Hindu tradition has ever recognised Brahma as the Supreme Deity in the way Vishnu and Shiva have been conceived of and worshipped." (A. L. Basham)

"When righteousness is weak and faints and unrighteousness exults in pride, then my Spirit arises on earth. For the salvation of those who are good, for the destruction of evil in men, for the fulfilment of the kingdom of righteousness, I come to this world in the ages that pass." (Bhagavad Gita 4 :7-8)

"An important aspect of Vaishnavism is that it emphasizes God as someone you can have a personal relationship with." (Emily Baker)

"Although a very complicated deity to understand, Shiva is one of the most fascinating. To his devotees, he is seen as Brahman, the Absolute, and it is not difficult to see why because just as all opposites are united in the unmanifest Absolute so also are they united in the manifest Shiva." (Jeaneane Fowler: Hinduism – Beliefs and Practices)

"It is not that Shiva is superior to Vishnu, not that Vishnu is everything and Shiva is nothing, but it is the same one whom you call either Shiva, or Vishnu, or by a hundred other names." (Vivekananda)

Key words

Trimurti	Vishnu	Brahma	Brahman saguna
Shiva	gunas	sattva	tamas
rajas	Vedic	monotheistic	pantheistic
Vaishnavism	Shaivism	Shaivas	Ardhanarishwara

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that the Trimurti is the most important concept in Hinduism as it expresses important Hindu beliefs about Brahman.

Others argue that varnashrama dharma is the most important concept in Hinduism.

Some would argue that it is difficult to evaluate one concept against the other in terms of importance.

Key questions

How important is the concept of the Trimurti in Hinduism?

Are Vaishnavism and Shaivism religions in themselves?