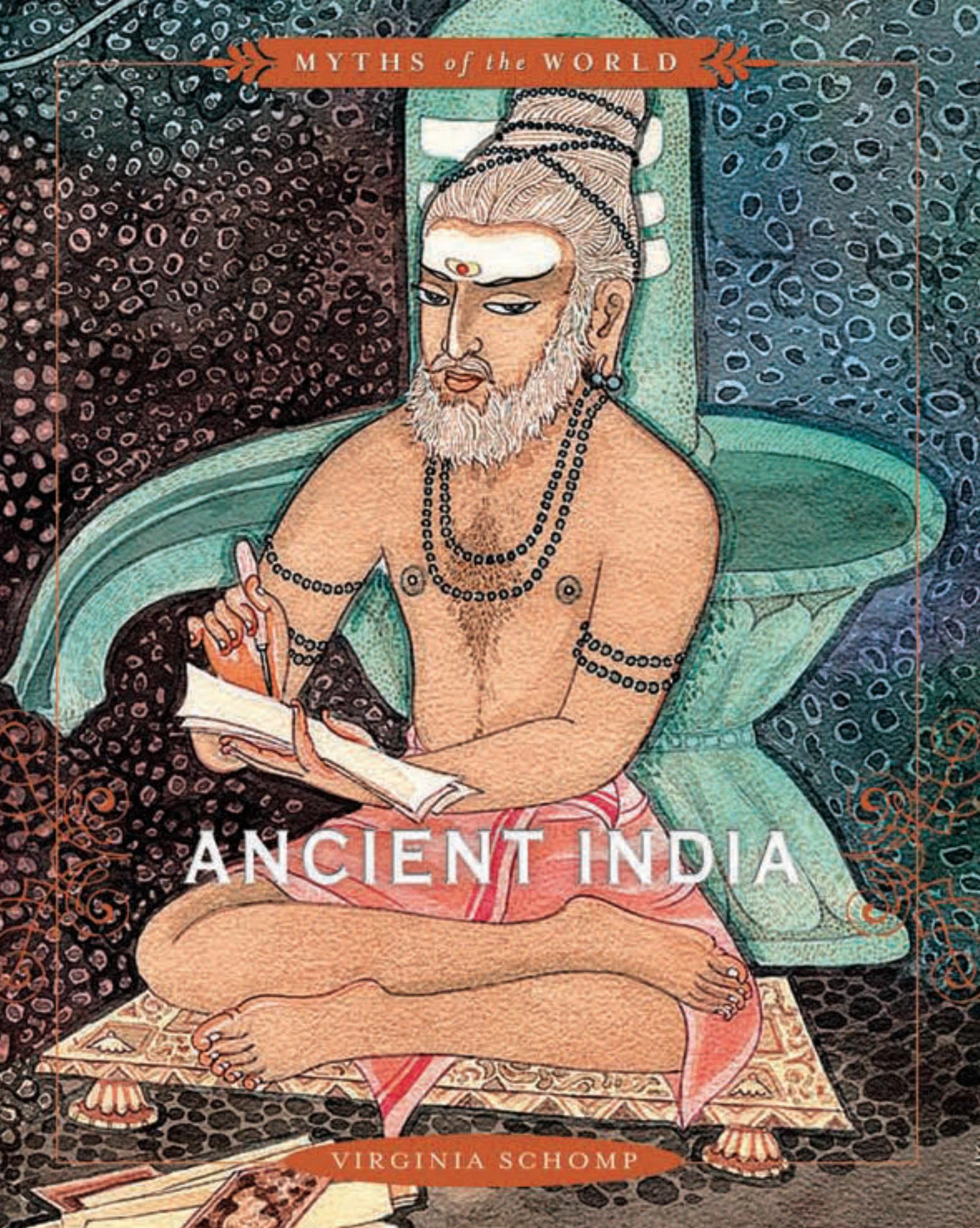


MYTHS of the WORLD



# ANCIENT INDIA

VIRGINIA SCHOMP



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VIRGINIA SCHOMP

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~~ For MFN Chris Schomp ~~

The author would like to thank George M. Williams, Professor Emeritus, Historian of Religion in India, California State University, Chico, for his valuable comments and careful reading of the manuscript.

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*Front cover:* A priest transcribes one of the sacred texts of India's oldest and most enduring faiths, Hinduism.

*Half-title page:* One of the fearsome demons of Indian mythology

*Title page:* Vishnu reclines on a serpent, with his divine wife Lakshmi at his feet.

*Back cover:* Agni, the two-headed god of fire, rides on a ram.



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## THE MAGIC *of* MYTHS

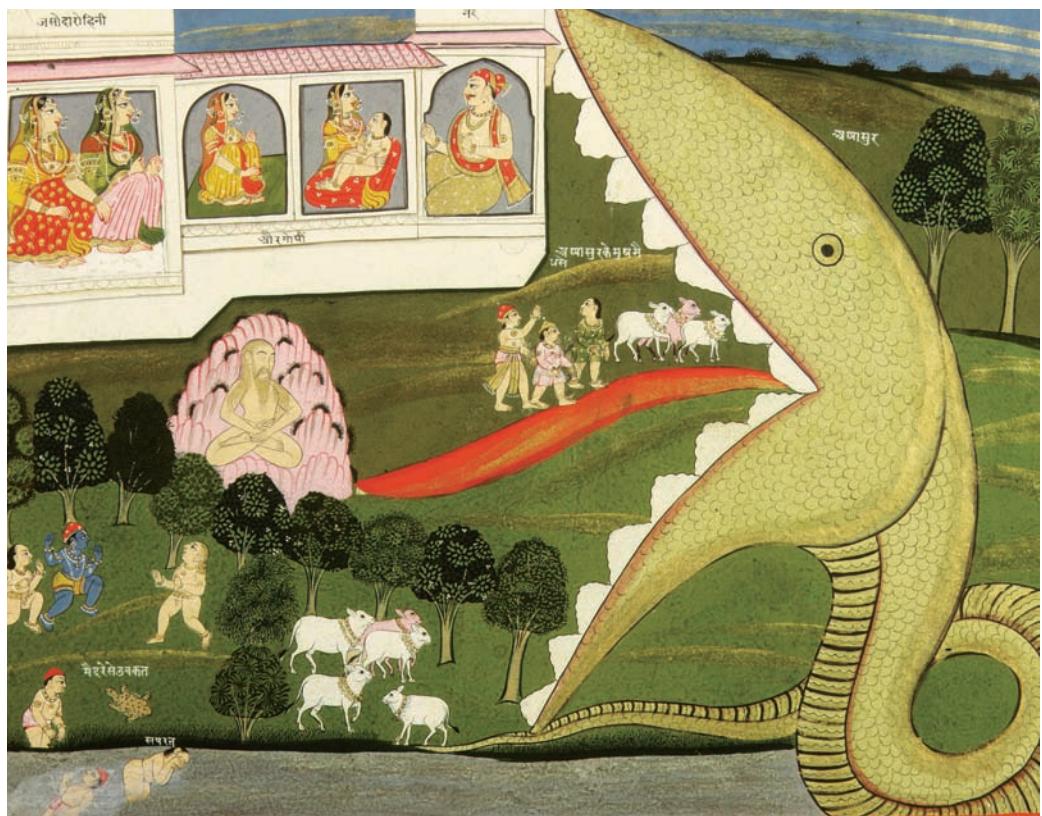
EVERY ANCIENT CULTURE HAD ITS MYTHS. These timeless tales of gods and heroes give us a window into the beliefs, values, and practices of people who lived long ago. They can make us think about the BIG QUESTIONS that have confronted humankind down through the ages: questions about human nature, the meaning of life, and what happens after death. On top of all that, myths are simply great stories that are lots of fun to read.

What makes a story a myth? Unlike a narrative written by a particular author, a myth is a traditional story that has been handed down from generation to generation, first orally and later in written form. Nearly all myths tell the deeds of gods, goddesses, and other divine beings. These age-old tales were once widely accepted as true and sacred. Their primary purpose was to explain the mysteries of life and the origins of a society's customs, institutions, and religious rituals.

*Above:* The elephant-headed god Ganesha is worshipped as a remover of obstacles.

It is sometimes hard to tell the difference between a myth and a heroic legend. Both myths and legends are traditional stories that may include extraordinary elements such as gods, spirits, magic, and monsters. Both may be partly based on real events in the distant past. However, the main characters in legends are usually mortals rather than divine beings. Another key difference is that legends are basically exciting action stories, while myths almost always express deeper meanings or truths.

Mythology (the whole collection of myths belonging to a society) played an important role in ancient cultures. In very early times, people created myths to explain the awe-inspiring, uncontrollable forces of nature, such as thunder, lightning, darkness, drought, and death.



Krishna (the blue god at the left) prepares to battle a giant serpent.

Hanuman the monkey god speaks with Rama, the blue-skinned prince who is a form of the great god Vishnu.



Even after science began to develop more rational explanations for these mysteries, myths continued to provide comforting answers to the many questions that could never be fully resolved. People of nearly all cultures have asked the same basic questions about the world around them. That is why myths from different times and places can be surprisingly similar. For example, the peoples of nearly every ancient culture told stories about the creation of the world, the origins of gods and humans, the cycles of nature, and the afterlife.

Mythology also served ancient cultures as instruction, inspiration, and entertainment. Traditional tales offered a way for the people of a society to express their fundamental beliefs and values and pass them down to future generations. The tales helped preserve memories of a civilization's past glories and held up examples of ideal human qualities and conduct. Finally, these imaginative stories provided enjoy-

ment to countless listeners and readers in ancient times, just as they do today.

The *Myths of the World* series explores the mythology of some of history's greatest civilizations. Each book opens with a brief look at the culture that created the myths, including its geographical setting, political history, government, society, and religious beliefs. Next comes the fun part: the stories themselves. We have based our retellings of the myths on a variety of traditional sources. The new versions are fun and easy to read. At the same time, we have strived to remain true to the spirit of the ancient tales, preserving their magic, their mystery, and the special ways of speech and avenues of thought that made each culture unique.

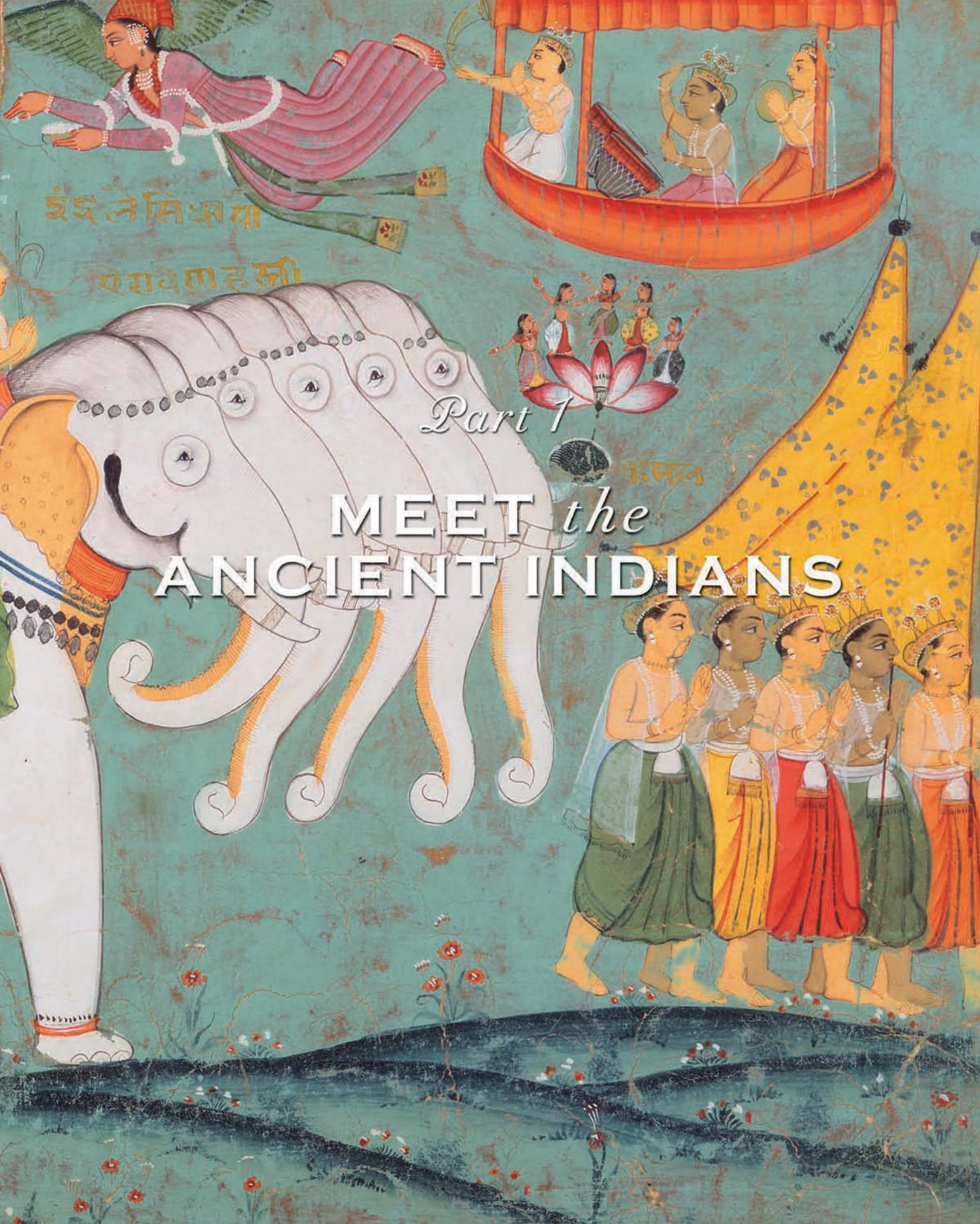
As you read the myths, you will come across sidebars (text boxes) highlighting topics related to each story's characters or themes. The sidebars in *Ancient India* include quoted passages from ancient hymns, poems, and narratives. The sources for the excerpts are explained in the Notes on Quotations on page 92. You will find lots of other useful material at the back of the book as well, including information on India's sacred texts, a glossary of difficult terms, suggestions for further reading, and more. Finally, the stories are illustrated with both ancient and modern paintings, sculptures, and other works of art inspired by mythology. These images can help us better understand the spirit of the myths and the way a society's traditional tales have influenced other cultures through the ages.

Now it is time to begin our adventures in ancient India. We hope that you will enjoy this journey to a land of mysterious gods and goddesses, powerful demons, and noble heroes and heroines. Most of all, we hope that the sampling of stories and art in this book will inspire you to further explorations of the magical world of mythology.



Part 1

# MEET *the* ANCIENT INDIANS







## A SACRED LAND



INDIA SITS ON A PENINSULA SO LARGE THAT IT IS KNOWN as a subcontinent. The southern part of this enormous landmass juts out into the Indian Ocean. The northern part is separated from the rest of Asia by the Himalayan Mountains. The Himalayas are the world's tallest mountain range. Since ancient times the people of India have revered these snowcapped peaks as the dwelling place of gods. In "How Ganesha Got His Elephant Head" (page 67), we will meet the divine daughter of the Himalayas, Parvati.

The Himalayas are just one of India's nine major mountain ranges. The vast subcontinent also holds a great variety of other landscapes. There are wooded hills, dry plateaus, arid deserts, tropical rain forests, and narrow strips of lush green coastland. A number of rivers flow through this varied terrain. The Indus River, in the northwest, gave India its name. In ancient times the fertile plain of the Indus was home to the region's earliest known civilization. To the east is the

*Opposite: A princess and her attendants relax beside one of India's sacred rivers.*

*Previous page: Indra, supreme god of the early Indians, rides in style on his divine white elephant.*

# ANCIENT INDIA





Ganges, India's holiest river. The Sarasvati River was an important waterway in early times, but it has since dried up. Each of these sacred rivers is associated with a goddess or god. So are thousands of other rivers, lakes, and pools. Today the people of India still come to their holy waters—especially the Ganges River—to sing, pray, and ask for the blessings of the special deities who preside there.

India has a long dry season, usually stretching from October to May. During the summer, monsoon winds bring moisture from the Indian Ocean, dumping heavy rains that can last for months. The monsoons often cause devastating floods and landslides. At the same time, farmers depend on the life-giving rains to bring water to their crops. Ancient histories recall years when the monsoons failed, leading to drought and starvation. According to mythology, droughts occurred when the gods were angry or dreadful demons captured the waters.

The snowcapped Himalayas rise from the banks of the Ganges River in northern India.



## A LONG AND GLORIOUS HISTORY

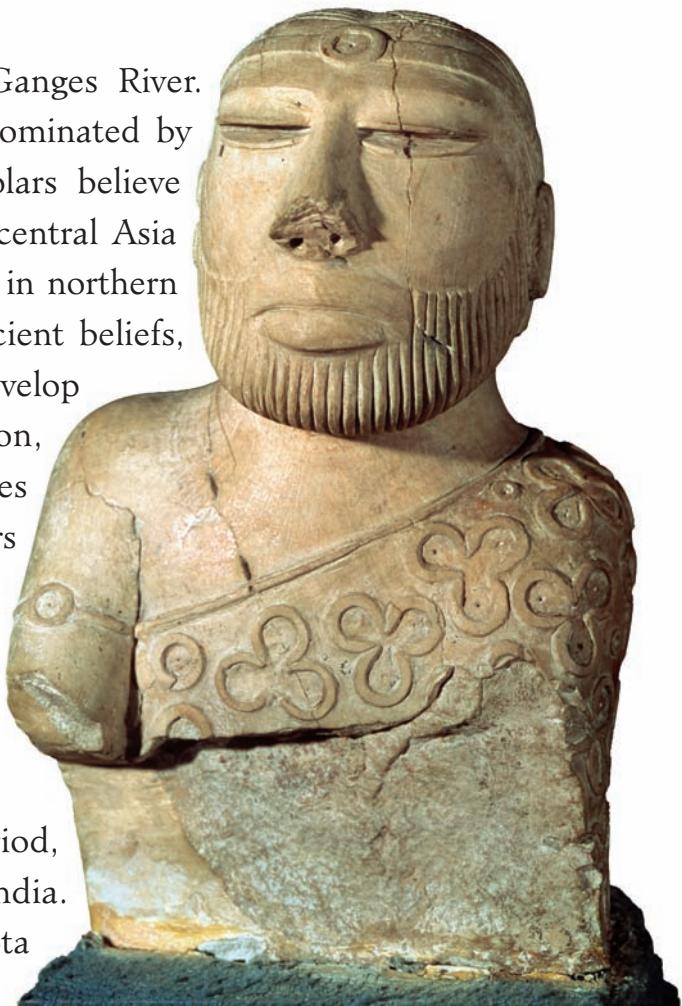
INDIA WAS HOME TO ONE OF THE WORLD'S EARLIEST civilizations. The Indus Valley civilization began nearly five thousand years ago in northern India and parts of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. The people of this highly advanced culture raised crops and livestock in the fertile plains of the Indus and Sarasvati rivers. They created beautiful pottery, jewelry, and stone and metal sculptures. They built splendid walled cities, including Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. Archaeologists exploring the Indus Valley cities have uncovered the ruins of paved streets, massive brick buildings, and a sophisticated system of baths, toilets, and sewers. They have also found clay seals carved with an ancient form of writing that has never been deciphered.

Around 1700 BCE the Indus Valley civilization faded. Some historians think that natural forces such as earthquakes, floods, and droughts may have driven settlers from their homes. Many people moved east-

ward, to the fertile valley of the Ganges River. There a new civilization emerged, dominated by the Aryans. Most modern-day scholars believe that the Aryans were nomads from central Asia who crossed the Himalayas to settle in northern India. These people brought the ancient beliefs, practices, and stories that would develop into India's dominant religion, Hinduism. The first Hindu scriptures were the Vedas, a collection of prayers and hymns written in Sanskrit, the language of the Aryans. The period of Indian history from about 1500 to 500 BCE is often called the Vedic period after these sacred texts.

Following the end of the Vedic period, two great empires rose and fell in India. A warrior-king named Chandragupta Maurya carved out the first empire in northern and central India around 332 BCE. Chandragupta's grandson Asoka brought nearly the entire subcontinent under Mauryan rule. After completing his conquests, Asoka renounced warfare and converted to Buddhism. Compared to Hinduism, Buddhism was a young religion. It had been founded around the sixth century BCE by the

A variety of systems of dating have been used by different cultures throughout history. Many historians now prefer to use BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) instead of BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini), out of respect for the diversity of the world's peoples.



This four-thousand-year-old statue of a man was discovered in the ruins of Mohenjo Daro, one of the great cities of the Indus Valley civilization.



Disciples of the Buddha, founder of the Buddhist religion, crowd the walls of an ancient cave temple in central India.



Indian prince Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, or “Enlightened One.” Asoka helped spread the Buddhist ideals of nonviolence and charity throughout much of central Asia.

After Asoka’s death the Mauryan Empire declined. Centuries of foreign invasions and internal divisions followed. Then, in the early fourth century CE, Chandra Gupta I\* founded ancient India’s second mighty empire. Under the Gupta Empire, India enjoyed a golden age of peace

and prosperity. Art, literature, mathematics, and science flourished. Several different religions, including Buddhism and Jainism, thrived alongside Hinduism.

By the late fifth century invasions and rebellions had weakened the Gupta Empire. Around 550 CE India divided into a mosaic of smaller kingdoms. Over the centuries that followed, large areas of the sub-continent would be dominated by a series of foreign conquerors. India’s culture would embrace ideas from many different peoples. At the same time, beliefs and practices reaching back to the dawn of Indian history would remain a vital part of everyday life.

The Buddha offered his followers a path to peace and enlightenment.

\* The names of ancient India’s kings and empires can be confusing. It may help to remember that Chandragupta, the name of the founder of the Mauryan Empire, is written as one word, while Gupta is usually a separate word in the names of the kings of the Gupta Empire.



## THE GROWTH *of* HINDUISM

**A**NCIENT INDIA WAS THE BIRTHPLACE OF SEVERAL OF THE world's major religions. The religion that played the greatest role in shaping Indian society was Hinduism. Today more than 800 million people in India and other lands still practice this enduring faith.

Hinduism had no single founder. Instead, it was born out of a blending of the beliefs of the ancient Indus Valley civilization and India's Aryan settlers. Over the centuries it absorbed many new ideas from foreign invaders and from rival religions that emerged at home. By the golden age of the Gupta Empire, there were many different varieties of Hinduism, embracing a wide range of beliefs and practices.

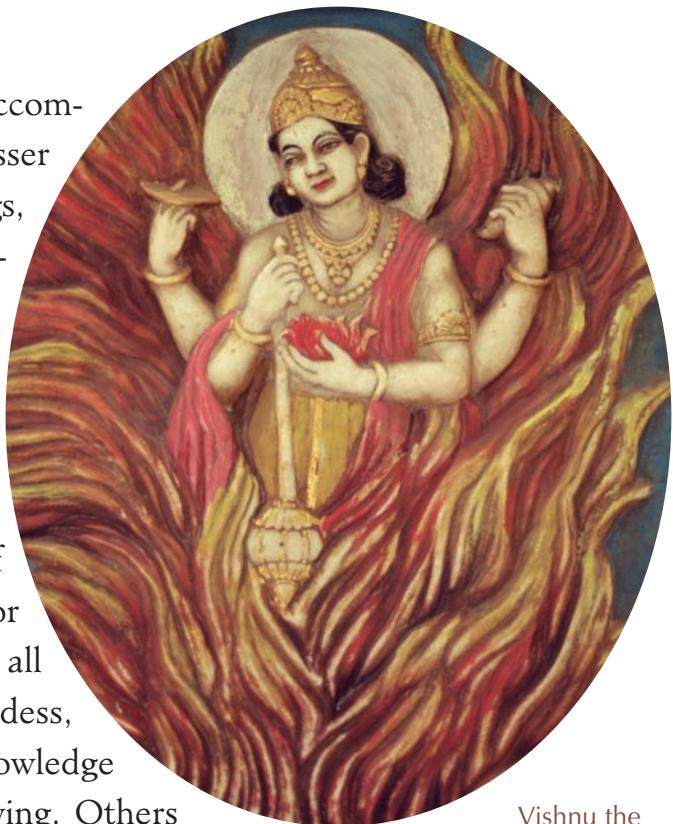
Most Hindus believe in a vast number of gods and goddesses. During the Vedic period, the three most important deities were Agni, god of fire; Surya, god of the sun; and Indra, god of storms and battle. Over time a new trio rose to importance. The gods of this sacred Hindu trinity are Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva

the destroyer. The great gods are accompanied by many thousands of lesser gods, spirits, and other divine beings, each with their own powers and personalities. Ancient Hindu scriptures explain that all the gods, greater and lesser, are different forms of the one Supreme God, called Brahman.

The Hindu goddesses are regarded as different forms of Mahadevi, the “Great Mother” or “Great Goddess” who gave rise to all life. Some forms of the Great Goddess, such as Sarasvati, goddess of knowledge and the arts, can be gentle and giving. Others are more dangerous. In “Durga Slays the Buffalo Demon” (page 59) and “Kali the Destroyer” (page 65), we will meet two of Hinduism’s most bloodthirsty warrior goddesses.

The gods and goddesses are opposed by a host of evil spirits, ghosts, and monsters. Most fearsome of all are the *asuras* (ah-SOO-rahz), or demons, who dwell in the underworld. The *asuras* constantly battle the gods for control of the universe.

Stories of the gods and goddesses have been told and retold many different ways through the ages, both orally and in the sacred Hindu texts. Elements of the stories often change in the retellings. Indian listeners and readers have never been bothered by the inconsistencies. For them, the many versions of these ancient tales are like variations on a piece of music—all enjoyable and all true from a mythological point of view.



Vishnu the preserver holds objects symbolizing his divine powers and his role as the protector of humanity.

# THE HINDU GODS *and* GODDESSES

The ancient Hindus worshipped thousands of different gods and goddesses. Here are a few of their most important deities.

**BRAHMA**  
Creator of the universe; first god of the Hindu trinity

**VISHNU**  
Preserver of the universe

**SHIVA**  
God of both destruction and creation



Shiva the destroyer

<b>AGNI</b>	God of fire
<b>DURGA</b>	Warrior goddess; slayer of demons
<b>GANESHA</b>	Elephant-headed god of wisdom, wealth, and good fortune; remover of obstacles
<b>INDRA</b>	Early king of the gods; god of storms and battle
<b>KALI</b>	Goddess of destruction
<b>KRISHNA</b>	Ninth and most important incarnation of Vishnu
<b>LAKSHMI</b>	Goddess of good fortune; wife of Vishnu
<b>PARVATI</b>	Goddess of the mountain; wife of Shiva
<b>RAMA</b>	Seventh incarnation of Vishnu
<b>SARASVATI</b>	Goddess of knowledge and the arts; wife of Brahma
<b>SURYA</b>	God of the sun
<b>VARUNA</b>	God of water, rain, and fertility
<b>VAYU</b>	God of the wind



# HINDU BELIEFS *and the* CASTE SYSTEM

*A*

ACCORDING TO THE EARLIEST HINDU WRITINGS, INDIA'S Aryan people were loosely divided into social classes, based mainly on wealth and occupation. Over time those divisions developed into a rigid, highly organized social system. The Indians called their system of social classes *varnas*. Later European observers used the word *castes*.

There were four main castes. At the top of the social order were the Brahmins, or priests. Next came the Kshatriyas, who traditionally were government leaders and professional warriors. The Vaishya caste was made up of farmers and merchants. The lowest caste was the Shudras, who included servants, laborers, and craft workers. At the very bottom of society was a group of people with no caste at all, known as untouchables. The untouchables worked at jobs that were considered "impure," such as butchering animals or collecting garbage. Within the four basic castes were thousands of subgroups, or *jatis* (JAH-teez), based mainly on a family's traditional occupation. A



This nineteenth-century painting captures one of the many ceremonies that filled the lives of members of the Brahman class.

Shudra, for example, might be born into a blacksmith or tailor *jati*.

The caste system was rooted in two basic principles of Hinduism: reincarnation and karma. According to Hindu beliefs, every person has an eternal soul, which is reincarnated, or reborn, in a new body after death. The form of rebirth depends on the individual's karma. Karma is the sum of all good and bad deeds that the person has performed during past lives. An individual born into the privileged Brahman class is said to have lived better past lives than someone reborn as a Vaishya or Shudra.

In order to achieve a higher rebirth, Hindus must live according to their dharma. Dharma is the set of duties divinely assigned to each person according to his or her place in society. Around 200 CE Hindu priests spelled out those religious and social obligations in a text called the Laws

of Manu. According to that sacred text, all people have a duty to work in one of their caste's traditional occupations and marry someone from their own social class. The rules also dictate what kinds of food members of each caste can eat, who can share their meals, how they should dress, and many other aspects of daily life. Those who faithfully fulfill their dharma may eventually achieve *moksha* (MAWK-shuh), or liberation. In this state of perfect knowledge and bliss, a person escapes the cycle of death and rebirth and merges with the One God, Brahma.

Dharma is a frequent theme in Indian mythology. In "The Ramayana" (page 45), young prince Rama goes into exile in order to fulfill his dharma. In "The Wisdom of Krishna" (page 56), the celebrated Hindu god Krishna instructs a warrior in the importance of fulfilling his duty as a member of the Kshatriya caste.



Some Shudras were garland makers, skilled in the art of making beautiful arrangements from intertwined flowers and berries.



## *The IDEAL PATH*

**F**OR THE PEOPLE OF ANCIENT INDIA, HINDUISM WAS more than a religion. It was a way of life. We have seen how Hindu beliefs shaped Indian society through the caste system and dharma. Sacred Hindu texts also provided men of the three upper castes with a blueprint for the ideal life. Few Indians ever followed these guidelines exactly, but many tried to live close to the ideal path.

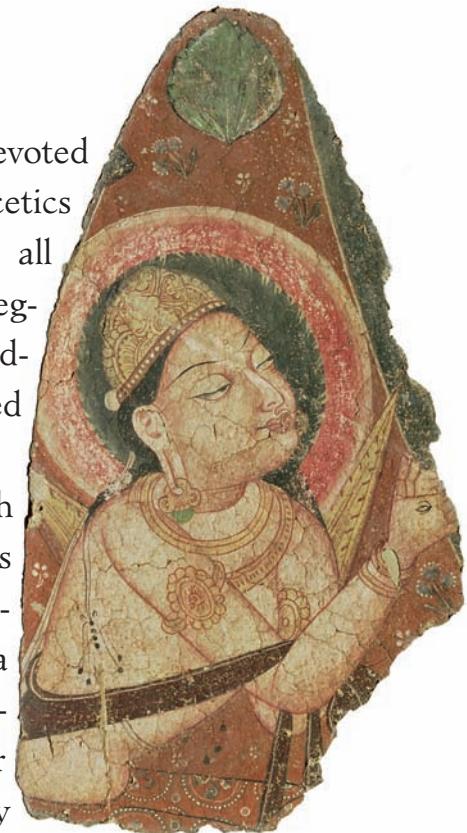
There were four main stages in the ideal life: student, householder, hermit, and wanderer. In the first stage, a boy went to live in the home of a guru, or spiritual teacher. There he studied the Vedas and other sacred texts and learned practical skills such as math, science, and martial arts. In the second stage of life, the young man married, raised a family, and worked at an occupation suitable for his caste. As the head of his household, he was responsible for performing daily rituals honoring the gods and the family's ancestors. In later life a householder might retire to a hermitage. Hermits spent their days studying the scriptures

and performing religious rituals. Finally, a truly devoted man might end his days as a wanderer, or ascetic. Ascetics gave up their homes and possessions. Freed from all worldly ties and desires, they wandered the land, begging for their daily meal. Through prayer, fasting, meditation, and other practices, these holy men searched for spiritual knowledge.

For the women of ancient India, the ideal path nearly always involved marriage and motherhood. Girls were raised to be respectful and obedient. Their mothers instructed them in the skills needed to manage a household. Upper-caste girls also might study literature, painting, music, and other arts with a private tutor or a teacher at a hermitage. Most girls were married by the time they turned sixteen. As wives, they were expected to dedicate themselves to ensuring their husband's comfort and happiness. Sita in "The Ramayana" (page 45) offers an example of the ideal wife, who remains faithful and devoted to her husband despite all obstacles.

Both men and women might take part in the annual cycle of religious festivals honoring the gods and spirits. Spring festivals celebrated the start of the planting season. Summertime celebrations welcomed the monsoon rains with joyous festivals that included rites honoring Indra, god of storms. Fall was the time for harvest festivals, with offerings to the guardian spirits of the fields and farm tools. Winter began with a procession to the river, where people renewed themselves in the holy waters.

Many of India's religious festivals had their origins in mythology. One New Year's festival took place on the day that Brahma, chief god of the Hindu trinity, created the world. Our first myth, "Brahma Emerges from the Lotus Flower," tells this ancient Indian creation story.



Indra was honored for sending the rains that nourished farm fields.





*Part 2*

# TIMELESS TALES *of* ANCIENT INDIA





## THE ORIGINS *of the* WORLD

### *Brahma Emerges from the Lotus Flower*

THE ANCIENT INDIANS TOLD MANY DIFFERENT CREATION stories. According to some Hindu myths, the world was born from a golden egg. Other traditional stories say that creation began with the sacrifice of the primeval (original) man, whose body became all the parts of the universe. In one early tale, the god Indra shapes the universe. Later myths give the credit for creation to Brahma. Various versions of the Brahma creation story show the god producing the world by breaking open the golden egg or creating all living things with his mind or body.

*Opposite:* Four-armed Vishnu sits on the coils of a serpent. In his lower right hand, the god holds a lotus, signaling his creative powers.

*Previous page:* A Buddhist temple painting of Ravana, one of the most famous demons in Indian mythology

The following creation story comes from the Puranas. The Puranas are a large collection of texts on Hindu beliefs and myths, which were compiled over a period from about 300 to 1000 CE. These texts weave together several different views of the origins of the universe. In the tale that follows, creation starts with the emergence of a lotus flower from the navel of the god Vishnu. The lotus holds Brahma, who pours forth all the elements of creation from his body.

This simple tale introduces us to some complex ideas about time. According to Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, creation is a cycle, with no beginning and no end. Hindu sacred texts tell us that each cycle of time has four ages. During these inconceivably long periods, the universe is born, matures, and gradually decays. At the end of the fourth age, it is completely destroyed. All the elements of the universe dissolve into a great milky sea. Then, after a period of rest, Brahma reemerges from the lotus, and the cycle begins all over again.

---



## CAST *of* CHARACTERS

**Ananta** (UH-nun-tuh) Divine serpent

**Vishnu** (VISH-noo) Preserver of the universe

**Brahma** (BRAH-muh) Creator of the universe

---



LONG AGO THE UNIVERSE LAY IN DARKNESS. There was no sun or moon. No earth or sky or heaven. There was only a vast, milky body of water. In that shoreless sea floated the giant serpent Ananta, whose name means “endless.” And on the coils of the serpent lay the great god Vishnu, sleeping.

As Vishnu slept, a pure lotus flower grew from his navel. Its fragrance was heavenly, and its petals were as bright as the morning sun. As the divine petals unfolded, four-headed Brahma emerged. The lord of creation stepped forth from the lotus, and he was as radiant as the heart of the flower.

“Who are you?” Vishnu asked in a voice like thunder.

“I am the womb of all creation,” replied the lord Brahma. “In me is everything established. In my body is the entire universe,

DURING HIS SLEEP  
THERE AROSE...FROM  
HIS NAVEL A PURE  
LOTUS, WONDROUS  
AND DIVINE.

—KURMA PURANA



Brahma's body produced everything in the universe, even horrible demons like this one.

complete with gods and demons and humans."

Then the lotus-born god began to create all things from his body. He poured forth the waters, fire, sky, wind, and earth. He filled the earth with rivers, oceans, mountains, and trees. He created the minutes, hours, days, years, and ages, in order to organize the universe.

Next Brahma put his mind to the task of creating the demons and gods. He pulled the demons from the darkness of his buttocks. After producing them, he cast off his body and it became the night. He took on a second body and brought forth the gods from his shining face. This body too he abandoned, and it became the day. That is why the demons are most powerful at night, while the light of day belongs to the gods.

Now Brahma took yet another form, composed of pure energy. From this body emerged

human beings, with all their passions. The other creatures of the earth sprang from other parts of the god's body: sheep from his chest, cows from his stomach, horses from his feet, elephants, camels, buffalo, and others from his arms and legs. The roots and grasses were born from the hair on his body. The great god even sent forth the hymns and prayers of the sacred Vedas from his four mouths.

Thus the lord Brahma gave rise to all creation. But one day Brahma's life will come to a close. The universe and all its creatures will perish beneath the vast milky ocean. Then Vishnu will sleep, until it is time for Brahma to arise and create the universe all over again.



## THE ANCIENT INDIANS SPEAK

### *The HYMN of MAN*

An ancient Hindu hymn gives another version of the creation story. According to the Purusa-sukta, or "Hymn of Man," the gods created the world through the ritual sacrifice of the primeval man. They divided the body into parts, which became the physical features of the universe, as well as India's four social classes. The Purusa-sukta comes from an ancient text known as the Rig-Veda. The Rig-Veda is the first of the four Vedas, the earliest sacred literature of Hinduism.

When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him?  
What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

His mouth became the Brahman [priest]; his arms were made into the Warrior [Kshatriya], his thighs the People [Vaishyas], and from his feet the Servants [Shudras] were born.

The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. Indra [god of storms] and Agni [god of fire] came from his mouth, and from his vital breath the Wind was born.

From his navel the middle realm of space [atmosphere] arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus [the gods] set the worlds in order.

*Above: A Kshatriya, member of ancient India's military or ruling class*





## THE FIFTH INCARNATION *of* VISHNU

### *Yamana and the Three Steps*

ACCORDING TO HINDU BELIEFS, THE POWERS OF GOOD and evil are constantly struggling for control of the universe. Sometimes the forces of evil, represented by the demons, overwhelm the forces of good, represented by the gods. At those times Vishnu the preserver descends to earth in the form of an animal or a human in order to restore righteousness and order. The forms that Vishnu takes are called avatars or incarnations.

The number of Vishnu's incarnations varies in different sources. According to one popular list, the god has descended nine times, with the tenth still to come. The following myth from the Puranas is about Vishnu's fifth incarnation. A demon named Bali has defeated Indra, king of the gods, and seized control of heaven. Vishnu responds by descending to earth in the form of a dwarf Brahman priest named Vamana. Vamana outwits Bali and restores the gods to their proper place in heaven.

*Opposite:*  
The demon  
king Bali  
greets Vamana  
with a tradi-  
tional gesture  
of hospitality,  
pouring water  
so that the  
dwarf can  
wash his  
hands and  
feet.

There is no sharp line between good and evil in this entertaining tale. Indra, who had lost much of his importance by the time the myth was recorded, comes across as weak and helpless. Meanwhile, Bali the demon has many excellent qualities. He also possesses special powers, which were granted to him by Brahma in reward for his devotion. According to Hindu mythology, the gods would answer the prayers of anyone—human or demon—who prayed long enough and performed enough sacrifices correctly.

In the end Bali's powers are not enough to save him. Some people interpret the story of the demon's defeat as a warning against excessive pride and ambition. According to this view, Bali brings about his own downfall by ignoring his wise teacher's counsel and refusing to be satisfied with his own kingdom.

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## CAST *of* CHARACTERS

**Bali** (BUH-lee) King of the demons

**Brahma** (BRAH-muh) Creator of the universe

**Indra** (IN-druh) Early king of the gods

**Aditi** (uh-dih-TEE) Mother of Indra

**Vishnu** (VISH-noo) Preserver of the universe

**Vamana** (VUH-muh-nuh) Dwarf incarnation of Vishnu

**Shukra** (SHOO-kruh) Teacher of the demons

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**B**ALI, KING OF THE DEMONS, was righteous, generous, and wise. Through his prayers and sacrifices, he had won the special protection of Brahma. So powerful did the demon become that his kingdom extended not only over the underworld but all the earth, too.

The people of the earth loved their demon ruler. Under his reign they dwelled in peace, prosperity, and happiness. Freed from hunger and fear, all people devoted themselves to their social and religious duties.

But for all his accomplishments, Bali had one great fault: his limitless ambition. The demon king ruled over a vast empire, but heaven still belonged to the gods. So one day Bali called up his army. Millions of demons marched to the plains of heaven, where they met the army of the gods, led by thousand-eyed Indra. The clash between the two forces was terrible. Battle cries tore the sky, and blood flowed in a ghastly river. By the time the dust settled, the demons had vanquished the divine army and Bali had taken Indra's place on the throne of heaven.

After his defeat Indra fled to the home of his mother, Aditi. When the goddess heard her son's sad story, she appealed to mighty Vishnu.

*Above: Bali and his demon court ruled over the kingdoms of heaven and earth.*



The once-great Indra needed help to recover the throne of heaven.

to Brahma has made him nearly invincible. It will take a clever plan to defeat such a powerful opponent." Then the god disappeared. And at that very moment, Aditi conceived a child.

For nine months Vishnu grew in the womb of Aditi. At last the mighty lord was born in the form of the dwarf Vamana. All who saw the tiny child were filled with wonder. Never had there been a dwarf of such beauty! As the child grew up, he studied the sacred knowledge of the priests, and everyone marveled at his learning and wisdom.

Now came a series of troubled years on earth. Earthquakes shook the mountains, and fierce storms swelled the oceans. Rivers overflowed, sweeping away entire villages. When the demons performed their sacrifices, the fires would not consume their offerings. Bali went to his teacher Shukra to discover the cause of all these catastrophes. "The earth trembles," said the king. "Our strength fades as the fires refuse our offerings. What curse has been laid upon the demons?"

The wise teacher pondered the king's question. Through the power of meditation, he peered into the mysteries of the gods. At last Shukra gave his answer: "Vishnu has descended in the form of a dwarf. The earth shakes and the waters churn at the tread of his mighty feet.

"O god of gods, look with favor upon your loyal followers," prayed Aditi. "Bali has deprived my son Indra of his heavenly kingdom. The demons keep all of men's sacrifices for themselves, denying the gods their rightful portion. Have mercy, O lord, and restore order to the world. Let the gods reign again in heaven."

"Your wish shall be granted," replied Vishnu. "But Bali is righteous. His devotion

Because the god of gods is nearby, the fires refuse the demons' offerings. Because of him, the strength is stolen from your bodies."

When Bali heard his teacher's words, he resolved to hold the grandest of all sacrifices. He would give away all his wealth to the Brahman priests. Through his devotion and generosity, he would recover his powers.

Great crowds came to heaven to witness the glorious sacrifice. The tables were piled high with gifts for the Brahmans. Hundreds of priests performed the sacred rituals and chanted the sacred formulas. An unending series of offerings were placed in the sacred fires.

Then a hush fell over the sacrificial hall. A Brahman no bigger than a child had entered. The dwarf wore a simple loin cloth. He held a water jug in one hand and a book in the other, in the manner of holy wanderers. Smiling gently, he crossed the hall to stand before the throne of Bali.

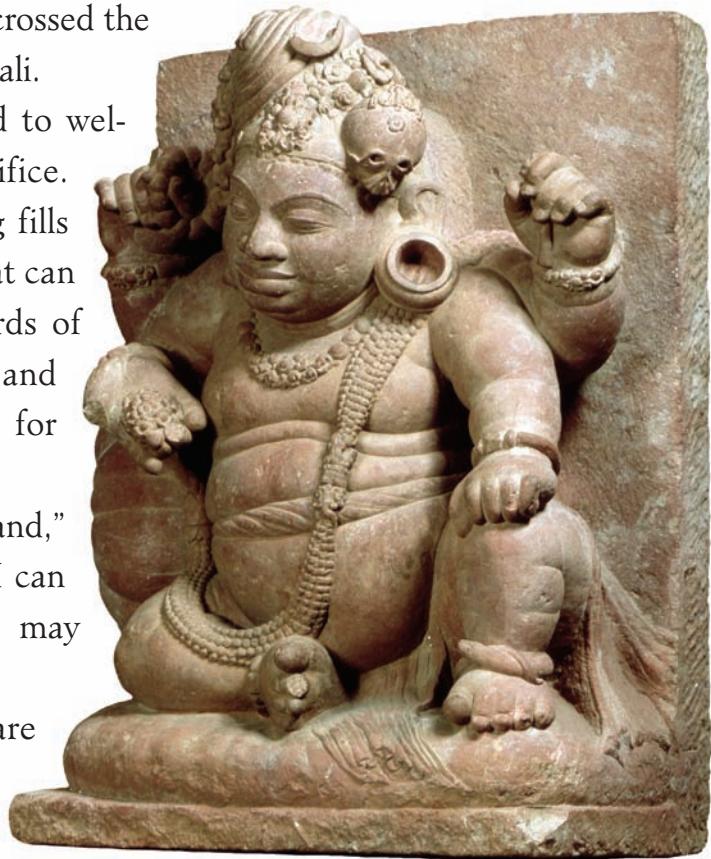
The demon king was delighted to welcome such a holy man to his sacrifice.

"You are young, but your learning fills you with splendor," said Bali. "What can I give you? Gold and jewels? Herds of elephants and horses? All these and the entire earth as well are yours for the asking."

"All I ask is three paces of land," said the dwarf. "As much land as I can cover with three steps, so that I may build an altar."

Bali laughed. "What good are only three steps? Ask for a hundred or a hundred thousand!"

Gentle-looking Vamana had the power to grow as big as the universe.



“I am satisfied with only this much, O king,” replied Vamana. “Give your wealth to others.”

Shukra was watching and listening as the little Brahman spoke to the king. When Vamana continued to insist on his meager gift, the wise teacher grew suspicious. “Be careful,” he whispered to Bali. “I do not trust this young priest. Surely this is Vishnu in the guise of a dwarf, come to drive out the demons!”

“I have given my word,” replied the demon king. “I will not withdraw my offer of charity.” Then Bali turned to Vamana and said, “Very well, you shall have what you ask for.”

No sooner were the words spoken than the dwarf began to grow. He grew and grew, until he filled the universe. His head was the sky. His eyes were the moon and sun. The pores of his body were the stars, and his breath was the wind.

With his first step, the giant covered the earth and the underworld. With his second step, he covered all of heaven. “You promised me three paces of land,” he thundered down to Bali. “I have covered everything in two steps. Where shall I place my third?”

Now the demon king knew that Vamana

was the god of gods, Vishnu. He bowed down in devotion. “I will fulfill my vow, O lord,” he said humbly. “Please, take your third step on my head.”

So Vishnu placed his giant foot on the head of the king. He pushed Bali down from heaven, through the earth, all the way to the underworld. He restored Indra and the other gods to their proper place in heaven. Then, in recognition of the demon king’s generosity, Vishnu made Bali ruler of the underworld for all eternity.

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**[VISHNU] STEPPED  
OVER THE HEAVEN,  
THE SKY, AND EARTH,  
THIS WHOLE UNIVERSE,  
IN THREE STRIDES.**

—VAYU PURANA



## THE ANCIENT INDIANS SPEAK

### *The FATE of BALI*

Different versions of the myth of Vamana the dwarf assign different fates to Bali. In some accounts Vishnu honors the righteous demon king after toppling him from heaven. He might grant Bali immortality, allow him to enter heaven or, as in our retelling, make him ruler of the underworld. In other versions the god is not so generous. According to this passage from the Puranas, Vishnu sealed his victory over the demons by sending Bali and his followers down to the underworld in chains.

The dwarf, the lord, stepped over the heaven, the sky, and earth, this whole universe, in three strides; he, the famous one, . . . surpassed the sun in his own energy, illuminating all the regions of the sky and the intermediate points of the compass. The great-armed Vishnu who excites men [with awe] shone forth, illuminating all the worlds, and stole away the demons' prosperity as he stole away the three worlds. He sent the demons, with all their sons and grandsons, to hell; Namuci, Sambara, Prahlada [three powerful demons]—these cruel ones were destroyed by Vishnu and scattered in all directions. . . . Bali, with his friends and relations, was bound with great cords, and the whole family of Virocana [Bali's father] was sent to hell. Then Vishnu gave the noble Indra kingship over all immortals.

*Above: Vishnu in his third incarnation, as a fish who saved the world from a great flood*





## THE SEVENTH INCARNATION *of* VISHNU

### *The Ramayana*

ONE OF THE MOST BELOVED INCARNATIONS OF THE GOD Vishnu is Rama. According to Hindu mythology, Vishnu came to earth in the form of this heroic prince in order to defeat the demon king Ravana. Rama was born to King Dasharatha, who planned to turn over the throne to his noble son. Through the scheming of his stepmother, the prince was banished from the kingdom instead. He went into exile, accompanied by his devoted brother Lakshmana and his faithful wife, Sita. When Sita was captured by Ravana, Rama rescued her and killed the demon. He then returned home and took his rightful place on the throne.

The story of Rama is told in the *Ramayana*. This epic poem was composed over the course of several centuries, possibly beginning around 200 BCE. It was based on even older folktales, legends, songs, and stories from the Vedas and other sacred Hindu texts. Through the years poets wove together all these different elements, creating an

*Opposite:*  
Vishnu,  
preserver of  
the universe,  
displays all of  
creation on  
his body.

The arch-villain of the Ramayana is the demon king Ravana.



exciting narrative that is considered one of the great treasures of world literature.

The Ramayana offers us a window into the beliefs and values of the people of ancient India. Sita represents the ideal wife. She dedicates her life to her husband and remains pure and faithful through her many ordeals. Lakshmana is an example of the perfect warrior, proving himself brave, loyal, and fearless. Rama is the ideal king. He is so devoted to his duty that he puts his responsibilities to his subjects ahead of his personal wishes. After rescuing Sita, he is forced to reject her. A king's behavior must be a model for his subjects, and a righteous man cannot live with a woman whose honor has been stained by living with another man. Only after Sita's purity has been proven can he rule with his queen by his side, bringing virtue and order to the world.



## CAST *of* CHARACTERS

**Dasharatha** (duh-SHUUH-ruh-thuh) Mortal father of Rama

**Ravana** (RAH-vuh-nuh) A demon king

**Brahma** (BRAH-muh) Creator of the universe

**Vishnu** (VISH-noo) Preserver of the universe

**Kausalya** (kaw-shuh-lee-AH) First wife of Dasharatha

**Kaikeyi** (kie-kay-YEE) Second wife of Dasharatha

**Sumitra** (suh-mih-TRAH) Third wife of Dasharatha

**Lakshmana** (LUCKSH-muh-nuh) Twin son of Dasharatha  
and Sumitra

**Shatrughna** (shuh-TROOGH-nuh) Twin brother of Lakshmana

**Bharata** (BUH-ruh-tuh) Son of Dasharatha and Kaikeyi

**Rama** (RAH-muh) Seventh incarnation of Vishnu; son of  
Dasharatha and Kausalya

**Janaka** (JUH-nuh-kuh) Father of Sita

**Sita** (see-TAH) Wife of Rama; incarnation of the goddess Lakshmi

**Shiva** (SHEE-vuh) God of destruction and creation

**Shurpanakha** (shoor-puh-nuh-KHAH) Sister of Ravana

**Hanuman** (huh-NOO-mun) God of the monkeys

**Vayu** (vuh-YOO) God of the wind

**Agni** (ah-GNEE) God of fire

**Lakshmi** (lucksh-MEE) Wife of Vishnu; goddess of good fortune

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# *The Birth of Rama*

IN DAYS OF OLD, King Dasharatha dwelled in a snow white palace in the fabled city of Ayodhya. Dasharatha was a righteous king, well loved by his subjects and renowned for his wisdom and devotion to duty. One thing only did he lack: a son to inherit his kingdom.

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**HEROIC RAMA, MEN  
PROCLAIM THE  
MARVELS OF THY  
MATCHLESS FAME.**

—THE RAMAYANA

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So Dasharatha summoned his priests and advisers. "You must prepare a great sacrifice," he commanded them. "If the offerings please the gods, they may send a son to brighten my autumn years and rule the kingdom after my death."

Soon the fragrant scent of the sacrifice rose to the heavens. The gods looked down with pleasure.

It happened that they were already assembled, trying to decide what to do about Ravana. The cruel demon king had drunk the blood of many innocent humans. He had interfered with men's holy sacrifices. Now he was threatening to overthrow the gods and take over heaven itself! No one dared to defy the demon, because he was protected by a great power. Long ago, Brahma had rewarded Ravana for his tireless prayers and fasting by granting him a special wish: no god or demon could ever defeat him.

"It is your fault that Ravana defies the hosts of heaven," all the gods said to Brahma. "You must find some way to rid the world of this invincible demon."

"It is true that I granted Ravana protection from all the beings of heaven and the underworld," Brahma answered. "But in his arrogance, he did not consider the threat from mere mortals. No god or demon can take the fiend's life, but a man could slay him. For the good of

heaven and earth, let us ask Vishnu to accept birth as that man."

As Brahma spoke, a dazzling light filled the universe. Vishnu drew near, riding on his golden eagle. "I shall be born on earth as the son of King Dasharatha," said the champion of the gods. "In human form I shall smite the fiend Ravana."

At that very moment, the flames of Dasharatha's sacrifice leaped up on earth. A giant figure robed all in red stepped forth from the fire. In his hands was a golden goblet filled with the nectar of the gods. "The god of gods has sent me," the divine messenger told the king. "Take this cup to your queens. Let them drink the heavenly nectar, and they shall bear you sons."

Dasharatha took the goblet and hurried to his three queens. He gave half the nectar to his first wife, Kausalya. The remaining portion he divided between his second wife, Kaikeyi, and his youngest wife, Sumitra.

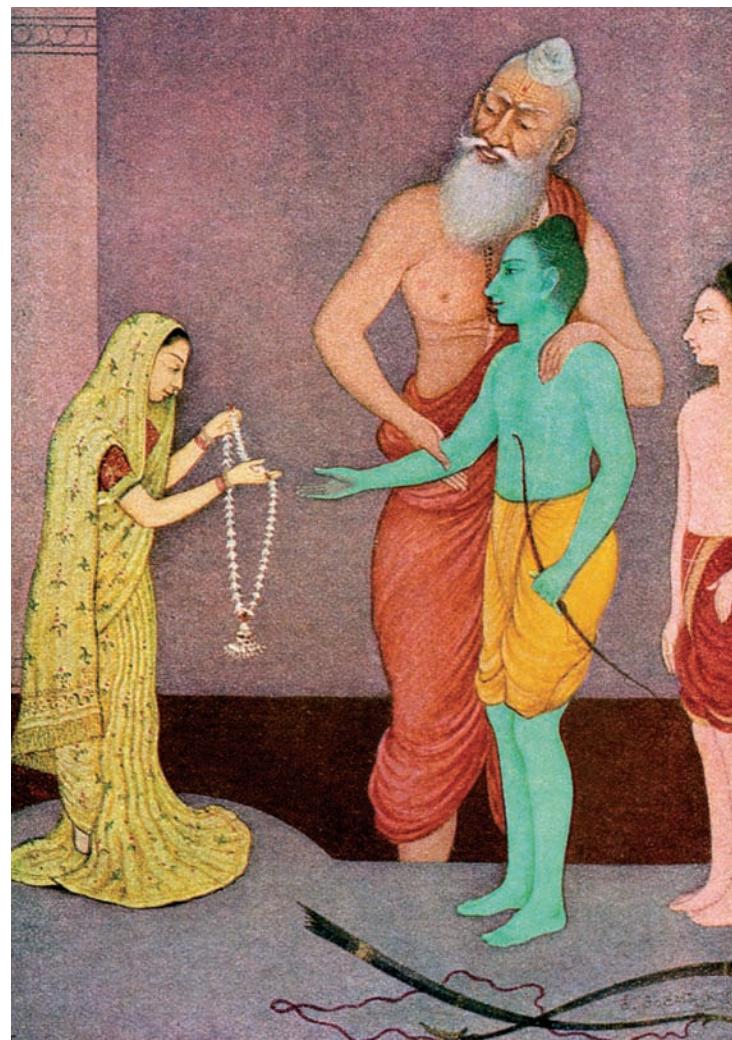
Soon each of the king's wives was with child. The seasons passed in happy anticipation. Then the three queens gave birth. Sumitra delivered twin boys named Lakshmana and Shatrughna. Kaikeyi had a son named Bharata. Kausalya gave birth to a boy with skin as blue as the lotus that blooms in the heart of the jungle. She brought forth Rama, the god born as a man to deliver the world from Ravana.



Vishnu rides on the shining eagle Garuda.

## *The Noble Prince*

DASHARATHA'S HEART SWELLED WITH PRIDE as he looked at his sons. The four princes had grown up to be fine young men. They had studied the Vedas and other sacred texts, and they had mastered the arts of war. No one in the kingdom had more grace, goodness, skill, or learning.



Amid these peerless heroes, Rama shined brightest of all. When he was just sixteen, he killed some monstrous demons who were terrorizing the holy men of the forest. After that victory the prince traveled on to the realm of King Janaka. There he fell in love with the golden-skinned princess Sita. Sita had been born from the earth itself and raised by Janaka as his daughter. The king had vowed to give her hand only to the man who could wield the divine bow of the great god Shiva. It took one hundred strong men to lift the colossal bow. Rama picked it up as if it were a feather. The gods smiled down from heaven as Rama and Sita were united in marriage.

Together the couple spent many happy, carefree days in Ayodhya. But King Dasharatha was growing old. He longed to lay down his burdens and spend his remaining years in prayer and meditation. One day he declared that he would pass on the throne to his best and noblest son, Rama.

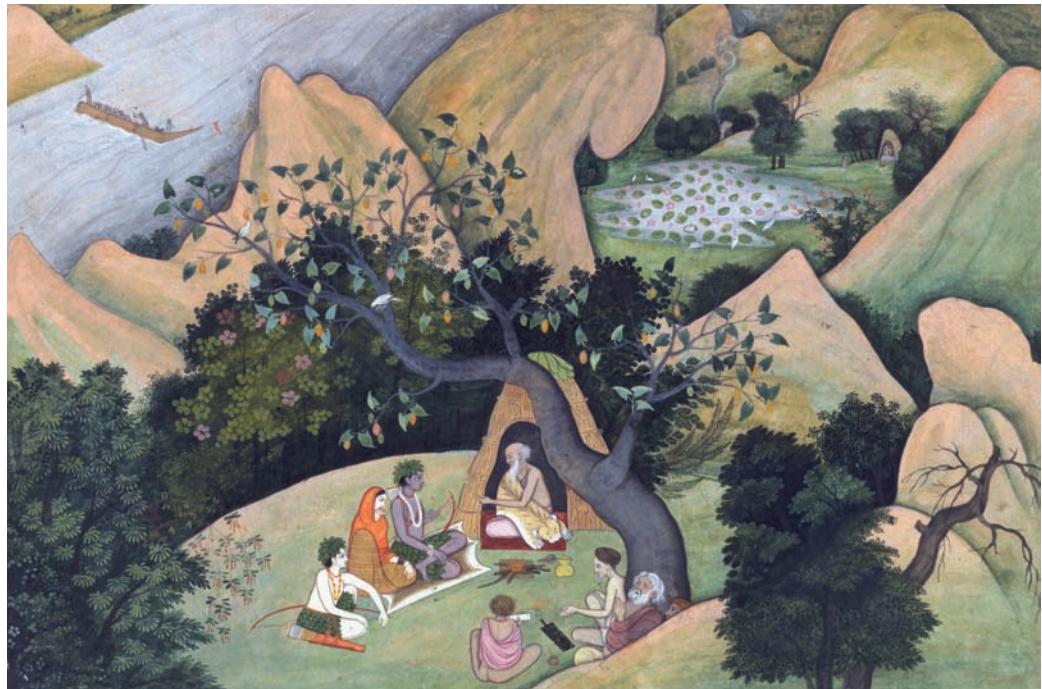
All the people of Ayodhya applauded the king's decision. All but one: Dasharatha's second wife, Kaikeyi. The jealous queen wanted her own son, Bharata, to be king. The night before the coronation, she reminded Dasharatha of a promise he had once made her. "I nursed you back to health when you were wounded in battle," she said. "In return you promised to grant me two wishes. I claim them now. Crown Bharata king, and banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years."

Dasharatha could not believe what he was hearing. He begged the queen to take back her cruel request. But Kaikeyi was unmoved, and the king could not break his promise without losing his honor.

The next morning Rama was summoned to the palace. He found his father slumped on the throne, choked with grief. It was Kaikeyi who pronounced the sentence of exile. Rama listened to her harsh words with a calm heart. "Gladly will I go into the forest," he said. "It is my father's duty to keep his word, and mine to uphold it. There can be no greater honor for a son than to obey his father, no greater virtue for a man than to fulfill his dharma."

So the noble prince bid farewell to his heartbroken father and set forth for the forest. But Rama did not go into exile alone. Instead, by his side were two who refused to be parted from him: his devoted brother Lakshmana and his faithful wife, Sita.

*Opposite:*  
After winning  
the marriage  
contest, Rama  
weds the  
golden-skinned  
princess Sita.



## *Sita and the Demon King*

**R**AMA, SITA, AND LAKSHMANA made a new home for themselves in the deep forest. They exchanged their jeweled palace for a bamboo hut, their silk clothes for bark and deerskin. They dined on wild fruits, roots, and honey. They bathed in clear spring waters. Thus their days passed peacefully, filled with simple joys and good company.

But this pleasant life was not to last. One day a loathsome demoness named Shurpanakha came upon the exiles' dwelling. One look at handsome Rama and the monster was in love. She used her magic to transform herself into a beautiful young woman. She tried to tempt the hero into leaving his wife, but Rama rejected her. In a jealous rage, Shurpanakha bared her claws and rushed at Sita. Rama grabbed the fiend just in time. He held her as Lakshmana chopped off her nose and ears. Then the demoness fled from the forest, howl-

*Above:*  
Rama, Sita, and  
Lakshmana visit  
a hermitage  
during their  
exile in  
the forest.

ing like a storm. She flew all the way to the island home of her brother Ravana, who vowed to take revenge on the sons of Dasharatha.

The next morning the demon king sent one of his warriors into the forest, disguised as a golden deer. Rama and Lakshmana chased after the wondrous creature. While they were gone, an aged holy man paid a visit to Sita. The princess greeted the sage respectfully. She stepped out from the hut to offer him food and water. Suddenly the man resumed his true form. It was the terrible ten-headed monster Ravana! The demon grabbed Sita by the hair, threw her into his magic chariot, and flew away to his palace on the faraway island of Lanka.

Soon Rama and Lakshmana returned home from the chase. When they discovered that Sita had been stolen, they set out to search for her. Through tangled woods and over lofty hills they wandered. After many long days, they came to the kingdom of the monkeys. There they met the wise and kindly monkey god Hanuman. Hanuman was the son of Vayu, god of the wind. He had the power to change his shape and fly anywhere. The moment he saw the sorrow on Rama's face, he promised to help the noble prince find Sita.

Hanuman took a deep breath. He swelled up as tall as a hill. He leaped into the air and sailed over the ocean. Landing on Lanka, he changed himself back into a little monkey. The god scampered about until he found Sita sitting in a lonely grove, weary with waiting.



**HANUMAN OF SUN-LIKE  
RADIANCE [WAS] LOFTY  
AS A HILL OF GOLD.**

—THE RAMAYANA

For ten months Ravana had been trying to force the faithful wife to forsake her husband. Now the demon had threatened to cut her up into pieces and eat her for breakfast if she would not submit to him. Sita wept with joy when Hanuman told her that Rama was coming to rescue her.

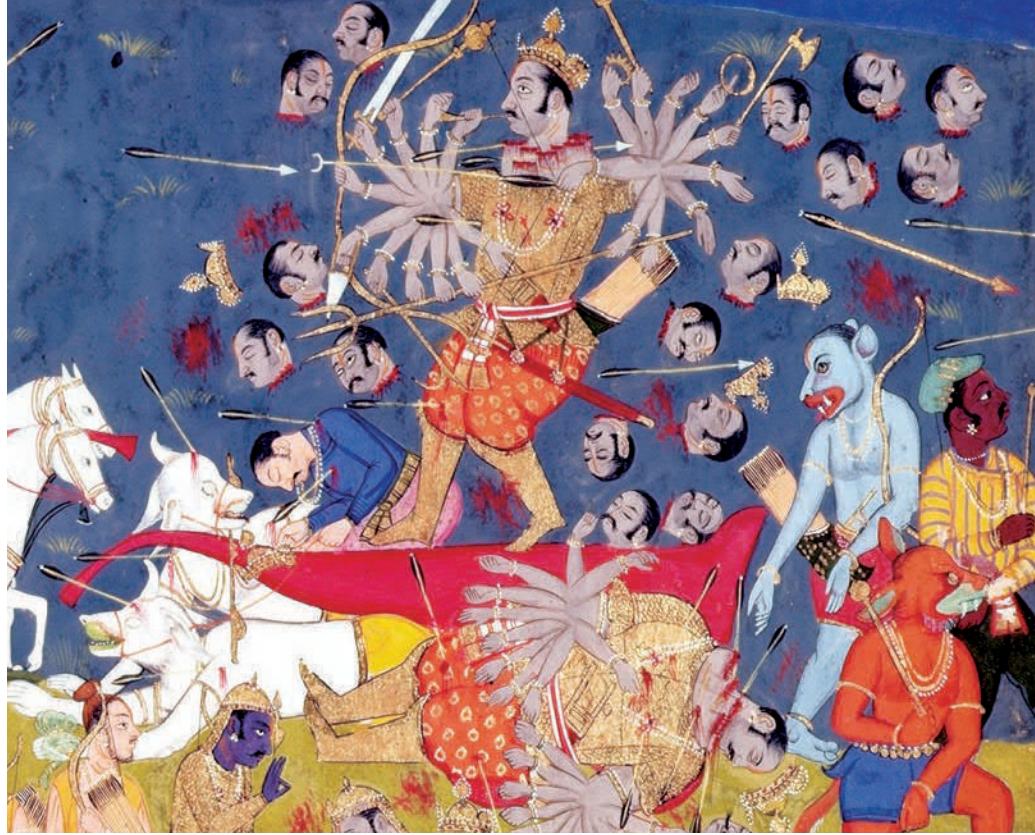
Rama's eyes shone with fury when he heard the news of Sita's captivity. Quickly Hanuman and his host of monkeys tore up rocks and trees to build a great bridge to Lanka. They marched across the churning sea to the island. There they faced the mighty demon army of Ravana.

Day and night the battle raged. Swords and war clubs clashed. Boulders, spears, and flaming arrows flew. Soon the field was red with blood and littered with the bodies of fallen soldiers.

Then Rama faced Ravana in single combat. The monster wore a golden helmet on each of his ten huge heads. Rama shot dense clouds of arrows, but as quickly as an arrow sliced off a head, another grew in its place. The hero reached for his last arrow, a golden shaft created by Brahma himself. The divine arrow tore open Ravana's armor and pierced his heart. The demon king fell dead.

At long last Rama and Sita were reunited. But when the devoted wife ran to her husband, the prince hardened his heart and turned away his face. Sita had lived in the house of Ravana for so long that he could not take her back. A man of honor could not live with an impure woman.

In vain Sita protested her innocence. Through all her trials, she had remained true to her husband. Finally, she demanded the right to prove her purity in the sacred fire. Wood was piled high and set ablaze. Sita stepped proudly into the flames. A moment later, she reemerged in the arms of Agni. "Behold your faithful wife, O prince," said the god of fire. "Pure of thought and word and deed she returns to you."



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**THEN RAMA'S BREAST WITH FURY SWELLED;  
HE STRAINED THE MIGHTY BOW HE HELD.**

—THE RAMAYANA

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Tears of joy flowed down Rama's face as he clasped Sita in his arms. Together they returned to Ayodhya, along with devoted Lakshmana. Old king Dasharatha had died of grief soon after his favorite son went into exile. For fourteen years Bharata had held the throne, awaiting his brother's return. The crowds cheered as Rama was crowned king, with radiant Sita as his queen.

For ten thousand years, Rama ruled over Ayodhya. In all that time, there was no hunger or disease, no crime or war. At last came a day when Sita returned to her mother the earth. After the death of his brave and faithful queen, Rama rose to heaven. There he woke from his long dream, resuming his true form as Vishnu, preserver of the universe. And there he found Sita waiting for him, in the form of his beloved wife Lakshmi.



## THE ANCIENT INDIANS SPEAK

### *The WISDOM of KRISHNA*

The Ramayana is one of ancient India's two great epic poems. The other work is the Mahabharata. With nearly 100,000 verses, the Mahabharata may be the world's longest poem. It tells the story of the rivalry between two noble families who both want to possess a kingdom in northern India. One of the poem's main characters is Krishna, the celebrated Hindu god who is believed to be the ninth incarnation of Vishnu. In a famous segment of the Mahabharata known as the Bhagavad Gita ("Song of the Blessed One"), Krishna speaks to a warrior named Arjuna. Arjuna has been tricked out of his kingdom by his relatives, but he is reluctant to fight them. Here Krishna urges Arjuna to fulfill his dharma as a warrior.

*Above: Blue-skinned Krishna served as chariot driver for the reluctant warrior Arjuna.*

Know what your duty is  
and do it without hesitation.  
For a warrior, there is nothing better  
than a battle that duty enjoins [requires].

Blessed are warriors who are given  
the chance of a battle like this,  
which calls them to do what is right  
and opens the gates of heaven.

But if you refuse the call  
to a righteous war, and shrink from  
what duty and honor dictate,  
you will bring down ruin on your head.

Decent men, for all time,  
will talk about your disgrace,  
and disgrace, for a man of honor,  
is a fate far worse than death. . . .

The duties of priests, of warriors,  
of laborers, and of servants  
are apportioned according to  
the [qualities]  
that arise from their inborn nature.

Serenity, control, austerity [self-denial],  
uprightness, purity, patience,  
knowledge, piety, and judgment  
are the natural duties of priests.

Boldness, the ability to lead,  
largeheartedness, courage in battle,  
energy, stamina, and strength  
are the natural duties of warriors.

Farming, cowherding, and trade  
are the natural duties of laborers;  
serving the needs of others  
is the natural duty of servants. . . .

It is better to do your own duty  
badly than to perfectly do  
another's; when you do your duty,  
you are naturally free from sin.







## **FACES of the GREAT GODDESS**

### *Durga Slays the Buffalo Demon*

THE HINDU GREAT GODDESS IS A POWERFUL AND COMPLEX character. She is the source of all energy, the giver of life, and the force that takes life away. She can be gentle and loving. She can be fierce and destructive.

All these different aspects of the Great Goddess's personality take shape in a number of individual goddesses. Most Hindu goddesses are honored as the wives and helpers of the gods. We have just met Lakshmi, the loving and faithful wife of Vishnu. Other important goddesses include Parvati, the wife of Shiva, and Sarasvati, often said to be married to Brahma. In nearly all of their myths, these goddesses are portrayed as devoted wives whose chief role is to support their divine husbands.

One of the few goddesses who has no lover or husband is Durga. This warlike goddess's sole desire in life is to kill demons. We might

*Opposite:*  
The warlike  
goddess Durga  
rode on an  
equally fierce  
lion or tiger.

think of her as raw power. Other goddesses are paired with gods who provide a balance to the goddesses' feminine energy, often using it as the power behind creation. Durga has no partner, which makes her untamed, unpredictable, and very dangerous.

The most important myth of Durga tells of her battle against the buffalo demon Mahisha. Like the demons Bali and Ravana in our earlier myths, Mahisha has been granted a gift that makes him nearly immortal. In order to defeat him, the gods must join their powers to create a bloodthirsty female warrior. Our retelling of this action-packed story combines several different versions found in the Puranas.

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## CAST *of* CHARACTERS

**Mahisha** (mah-HEE-shuh) Buffalo demon

**Rambha** (rum-BUH) Father of Mahisha

**Brahma** (BRAH-muh) Creator of the universe

**Vishnu** (VISH-noo) Preserver of the universe

**Shiva** (SHEE-vuh) God of destruction and creation

**Durga** (door-GAH) Warrior goddess

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**M**AHISHA THE BUFFALO DEMON was born from the union of a demon king and a ravishing she-buffalo. His father, Rambha, had prayed to Brahma for a thousand years, asking for a son. “Grant me a son of extraordinary strength and courage,” Rambha had asked. “A hero who can never be defeated by any man, god, or demon.”

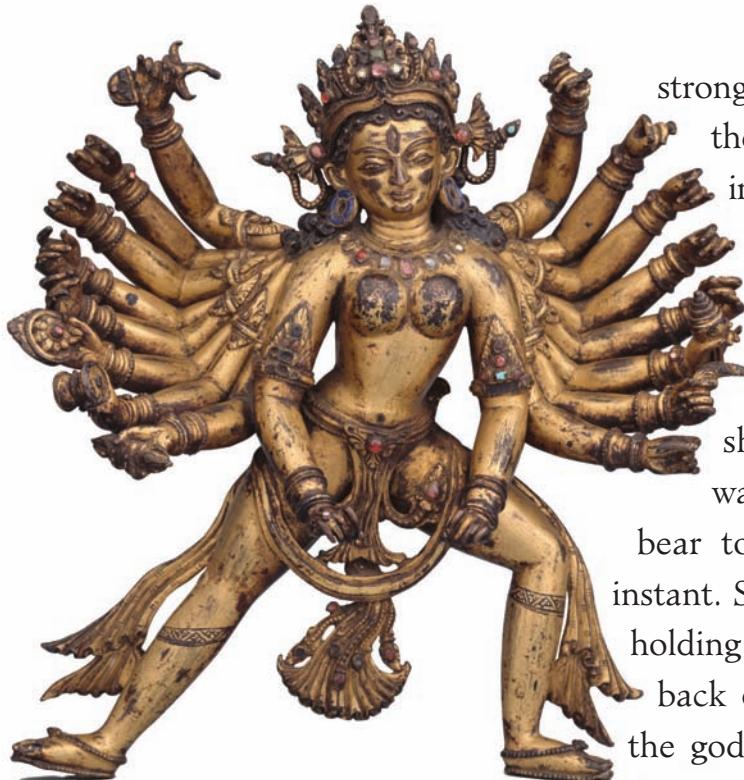
At last Brahma had rewarded Rambha for his prayers. Mahisha grew up to fulfill all his father’s desires. The young demon was stronger and braver than anyone else in the underworld. He had the power to take any shape he desired, although his favorite form was the buffalo.

In time the demons made Mahisha their king. They followed him up to heaven, where they challenged the army of the immortals. The bloodcurdling battle between the gods and demons lasted for one hundred years. Finally, the gods realized that they would never defeat the powerful demon king. They fled to the earth, where they hid out in dark caves and gloomy forests. Meanwhile, the gleeful demons enjoyed themselves in heaven. They relaxed in the gods’ palaces, drank the gods’ nectar, and forced the heavenly nymphs to do all their housework.

After a few years in hiding, the lesser gods gathered up their courage and went to see the three great gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. “Mahisha has expelled us from heaven,” the miserable gods cried. “How long must we wander on the earth like mortals, oppressed by the buffalo demon?”

“Mahisha is protected by a divine gift,” replied Vishnu. “No man or god or demon can conquer him. Let us combine our powers and create a different sort of champion.”

So all the gods shut their eyes and concentrated on their various powers. Lights began to shine from their faces, dim at first, then



stronger and brighter. Gradually all their divine energies joined together in a mountain of fire as brilliant as ten thousand suns. Out from the flames emerged the radiant goddess Durga.

Durga was as beautiful as she was terrible. Her golden face was so bright that no one could bear to look at it for more than an instant. She had eighteen arms, made for holding many weapons. She rode on the back of a fearless golden lion. When the gods saw the glorious goddess, the sorrow in their hearts gave way to rejoicing.

Durga's hands could hold a multitude of weapons, including her deadly three-pronged trident.

Bowing low, they offered her all their weapons. They dressed her in impenetrable armor and crowned her with precious jewels. Then Durga rode off on her lion to slay the buffalo demon.

Swiftly the lion bounded up to the entranceway of heaven. Durga challenged Mahisha's mighty army to battle. The demons took the field with a multitude of chariots, elephants, and horses. They wielded deadly swords, spears, axes, clubs, and wicked three-pronged tridents. The goddess answered with her own blazing weapons. Hundreds of demons were split in two by her sharp curved sword. Many more were crushed by her mighty war club, pierced by her arrows, or lassoed with her deadly noose. Her golden lion roared and shook his mane with fury as he devoured both living and dead warriors.

At last Durga stood alone on the blood-soaked battlefield. She had cut down the enemy the way fire rages through a dry forest. All the gods

shouted, "Victory!" and flowers rained down from heaven.

While the gods celebrated, Mahisha sat in his palace, waiting for news of the battle. When he learned of the total destruction of his army, he was furious. Resolving to trick the warrior goddess into defeat, the demon changed himself into the form of a hero. He rubbed perfume all over his handsome body and dressed in fine silk clothing. He rode out to the battlefield in a magnificent chariot drawn by one thousand donkeys. As soon as he saw the radiant goddess, he made up his mind to possess her.

"Hear me, O lovely maiden," said Mahisha. "I am the king of the demons, the bane of the gods. A woman like you has no place on the field of battle. Your weapons should be eyes and lips, charm and beauty. Cast aside your sword and choose me as your husband. With my great powers, I will give you anything your heart desires."

The goddess laughed at the demon's foolish prattle. "Only he who conquers me in battle shall be my husband," she said scornfully. "Now return to your own world, or show me your might. We shall see who has the womanish nature!"

Durga's words enflamed the demon. Swelling with rage, he took on his wondrous buffalo form. He shook the ground with his mighty hooves and whipped the ocean into waves with his tail. Then the buffalo demon rushed to attack the great goddess.

Durga hurled her noose and snared the charging demon. In a flash Mahisha abandoned his buffalo shape and slipped from the rope in the form of a lion. When the fierce goddess stabbed the lion, he turned into a powerful man with a sword in one hand and a shield in the other. Swiftly the goddess drew her bow and pierced the man with arrows.

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THE MOUNTAINS  
QUAKED, WHILE THE  
JOYFUL GODS CRIED  
OUT, "VICTORY!" TO  
THE GODDESS.

—MARKANDEYA PURANA

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The buffalo demon Mahisha was no match for Durga and her ferocious lion.



The demon escaped again, emerging from the man's body to become a huge elephant. He seized Durga's golden lion with his long, heavy trunk. The goddess severed the elephant's trunk with her sword. Once more the demon assumed his buffalo form. He uprooted mountains with his gigantic horns and tossed them at Durga, who pulverized them with a hail of arrows. Puffed up with his own strength and courage, the buffalo lifted his shaggy head and bellowed.

"Roar all you want, fool!" cried Durga. "In a moment the gods will be roaring as you die by my hand!" With those words the goddess leaped up and pinned the demon's throat beneath her foot. Crushed and strangled, Mahisha tried to change shape again. He only made it halfway out of the buffalo's mouth. As he struggled to escape, Durga cut off his head with her sword.

Thus a woman slaughtered the buffalo demon who had terrorized the entire universe. With the fall of Mahisha, order was restored to the world. Rejoicing, the gods returned to their rightful place in heaven. There they sang hymns of praise to Durga, as bands of heavenly nymphs danced all around them.

## THE ANCIENT INDIANS SPEAK

### KALI *the DESTROYER*

In one version of the myth of Durga and the buffalo demon, the goddess becomes so enraged that Kali springs from her forehead. Like Durga, Kali represents the “dark side” of the Great Goddess. She thrives on blood and adorns herself with body parts from her victims. This passage from the Puranas describes Kali’s slaughter of Mahisha’s demon army. It also reminds us that even the bloodthirsty goddess of destruction is simply another form of the Great Goddess, mother of the universe.

[Durga] became violently angry with her enemies, her face growing black as ink with rage. Suddenly there issued forth from between her eyebrows Kali, with protruding fangs, carrying a sword and a noose, with a mottled, skull-topped staff, adorned with a necklace of human skulls. . . . Attacking and killing the mighty demons, she devoured the armed force of the enemies of the gods. Seizing with one hand the elephants with their back-riders, drivers, warriors and bells, she hurled them into her maw [mouth]. In the same way she chewed up warriors with their horses, chariots and chario-teers, grinding them up most horribly with her teeth. . . . She ravaged the entire army of powerful evil-souled [demons]. . . .

In such a way, then, does the divine goddess, although eternal, take birth again and again to protect creation. This world is . . . begotten by her; it is she who gives knowledge when prayed to and prosperity when pleased. . . . As Lakshmi, or Good Fortune, she bestows wealth on men’s homes in times of prosperity. In times of disaster she appears as Misfortune for their annihilation. When the goddess is praised and worshipped with flowers, incense, perfume and other gifts, she gives wealth, sons, a mind set upon Dharma, and happiness to all mankind.



*Above:* The warlike goddess Kali wears a necklace of skulls and holds the severed head of a demon.





## THE REMOVER of OBSTACLES

# *How Ganesha Got His Elephant Head*

ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR HINDU GODS IS GANESHA. This unusual-looking deity has the body of a chubby boy and the head of an elephant. Ganesha is the god of wisdom, wealth, and good fortune. For more than two thousand years, he has been worshipped as the remover of obstacles. The people of India still ask for his blessings before they set out on a journey or begin any new venture.

According to Hindu mythology, Ganesha is the son of Shiva and Parvati. Shiva is part of the sacred Hindu trinity that also includes Brahma and Vishnu. Parvati is the daughter of the Himalayas, the sacred mountain chain in northern India. The god and goddess are a devoted couple, but their relationship sometimes turns stormy. Shiva is an ascetic who likes to roam all over creation, freed from all worldly ties and desires. Parvati wants her husband to settle down and raise a family.

*Opposite:*  
Shiva gazes  
lovingly at his  
sleeping wife,  
Parvati.

This conflict between Shiva and Parvati is the starting point for the most important myth about Ganesha: the story of how he came to have an elephant's head. There are several different versions of this ancient tale. Our retelling comes from the Shiva Purana, one of the eighteen Great Puranas. According to this ancient text, Shiva not only refused to have children but actually beheaded Ganesha, the son his wife had managed to create on her own. Parvati's fury over her son's death unleashed a catastrophic battle. In order to restore peace to the universe, Shiva had to bring Ganesha back to life. He accomplished this miracle by giving the young god a new head, taken from a baby elephant. That solution is not as odd as it seems. The elephant is one of the most important animals in Indian mythology, revered for its strength, dignity, and wisdom.

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### CAST *of* CHARACTERS

**Shiva** (SHEE-vuh) God of destruction and creation

**Parvati** (par-vuh-TEE) Wife of Shiva; goddess of the mountain

**Ganesha** (GUH-nay-shuh) Son of Parvati and Shiva; remover of obstacles

**Vishnu** (VISH-noo) Preserver of the universe

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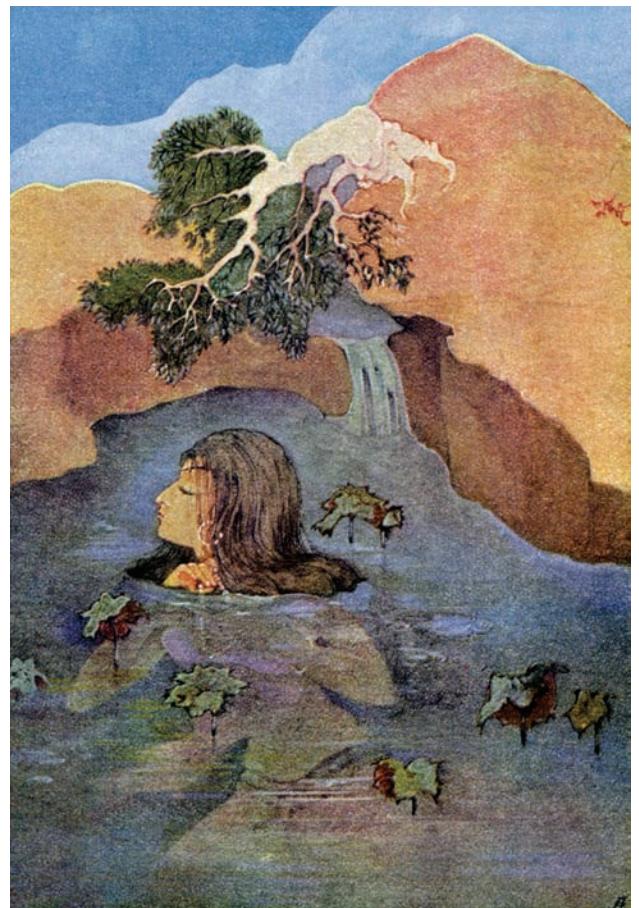
**H**IGH IN THE SNOWCAPPED HIMALAYAS lived the great god Shiva and his beautiful wife Parvati. The divine couple were very much in love. Even so, like all couples everywhere, they sometimes quarreled. Shiva left home for months at a time to meditate in the mountains. Parvati longed for a son to keep her company, but her husband had no desire to take on the duties of a father and householder. So day after day, the god practiced his meditation, while his wife sat in their crystal palace, bored and lonely.

One day Shiva returned home from a long absence. As always, the impetuous god went right to his wife's private chambers. Parvati was relaxing in her bath. When her husband burst in, she was upset and embarrassed. "How dare you enter here without my permission!" she shouted.

Parvati's cold greeting made Shiva angry. He stormed right back out of the palace. The goddess returned to her bath, sadder and lonelier than ever. As she washed the dirt from her body, it began to form into a shape. It was round. It was plump. It was a beautiful baby boy! Parvati held the baby in her arms, and he began to stir. She caressed him with the petals of a lotus, and he took his first breath. The goddess's heart overflowed with love as her new son cried out, "Mama! Mama!"

Little Ganesha grew up strong, brave, and handsome. One day Parvati told him that he was old enough to become her

The lonely goddess Parvati bathes in a mountain pool.



doorkeeper. "Let no one into the house without my permission, dear son," she said. "I am counting on you to protect me." With those words the goddess gave her little boy a tall staff as a symbol of his authority. She kissed him on the face and embraced him lovingly. Then she went inside the palace to take a bath.

Ganesha proudly took up his post before his mother's door. At that moment Shiva returned from his travels. The god was dressed in a tiger skin. His hair was matted, and his body was smeared with ashes in the manner of a holy wanderer. He strode up to the door, eager to see his wife. But when he tried to enter, Ganesha stopped him.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked the boy. "No one enters here without my mother's permission."

Shiva wore a tiger skin as a sign of his tremendous powers.



Shiva stared in amazement. "Who are you to keep me out?" he said. "Don't you recognize me? I am Shiva, husband of Parvati! I shall go into my own house, you idiot!"

Again the god tried to brush past the doorkeeper. This time Ganesha hit him with his staff. That made Shiva really angry! He summoned his attendants, and they descended on the palace. Shouting their battle cries, they assaulted Parvati's son with all kinds of weapons. The boy fought back with a sword and a huge iron-studded war club. Some of Shiva's warriors had their hands and feet cut off. Some had their chests or

backs shattered. Those who were spared ran back to their master like deer before a lion.

Now even Shiva was dismayed by the heroic doorkeeper. "Parvati's guard is a mere boy, but he has put my best troops to shame," said the god. "I must defeat him, or everyone will say that the great Shiva is intimidated by his wife. Yet surely the only way to kill such a powerful foe is through trickery."

So Shiva called on Vishnu, and that mighty god agreed to help him defeat his enemy. Vishnu attacked Ganesha with his razor-sharp discus. The boy fought back with his staff. While the two warriors were busy fighting, Shiva seized his opportunity. Taking a stand in the north, he hurled his three-pronged trident. The magical weapon flew through the air and cut off the head of Ganesha.

Shiva's warriors shouted and beat their drums in celebration of their master's triumph. Inside the palace Parvati heard the commotion. She peered out the door and saw her son's headless body. "My baby, my little baby," she cried. "Alas, how will I ever bear such sorrow?"

Then the grieving mother turned on the gods. "You have killed my son. For that you will suffer. The whole world will suffer!" Instantly hundreds of thousands of goddesses were born from Parvati's fury. The deadly beings were made of pure energy, and they lived only to fulfill the command of their mother. "O goddesses, you shall annihilate the world!" screamed Parvati. "The gods, the spirits, my very own followers. Destroy them all without mercy!"

Swiftly the wrathful goddesses went forth to spread devastation. They snatched up their victims and hurled them into their gaping mouths. Thousands of gods were devoured. The rest retreated in terror.

THE TRIDENT-  
WIELDING SHIVA  
TOOK HIS STAND  
IN THE NORTH  
AND CUT OFF  
THE HEAD OF  
GANESHA.

—SHIVA PURANA

“What shall we do?” the wretched gods asked one another. “It is not yet time for the world’s destruction! We must find a way to soothe Parvati with devotion.” So all the gods began to sing hymns of praise to the goddess: “O mother of the world, praise be to you. You are the power that protects, the power that destroys. To you, praise. To you, glory!”

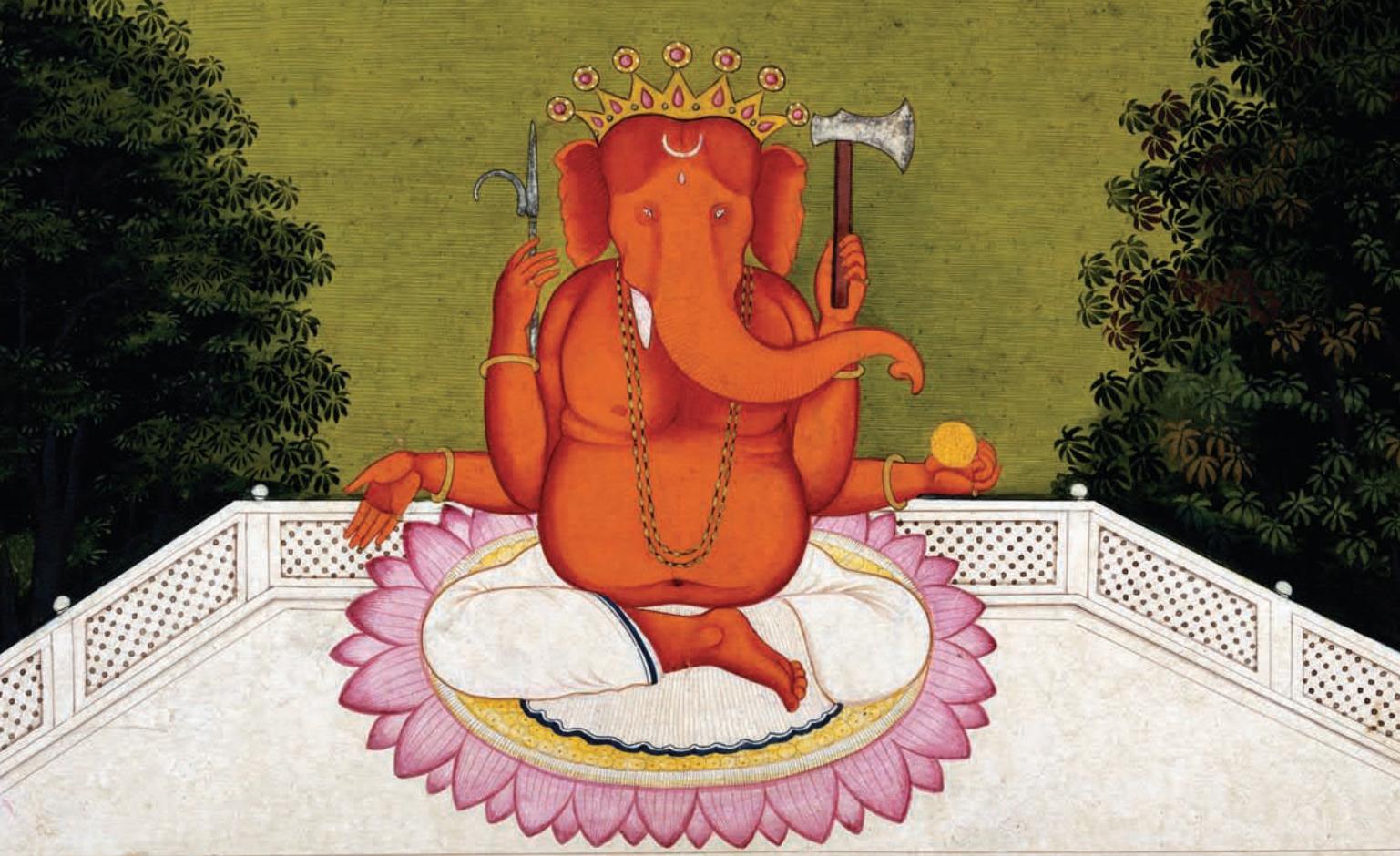
Still Parvati blazed with fury. So the gods prayed even harder: “Forgive our faults, O goddess. We are your very own creatures. Heaven and earth are devastated. O Parvati, grant us peace!”

As these fervent prayers reached the goddess, she began to feel calmer. Slowly her mind filled with compassion for the world’s suffering. At last she answered the gods: “If you can revive my son, I will stop the devastation. Restore him to life and honor him. Only then will there be peace in the world.”

The gods hung their heads even lower. How could such a deed be accomplished? But Shiva summoned his attendants. “We have wronged Parvati,” said the god. “We must do whatever is necessary to make her happy and save the world. I was standing in the north when I cut off her son’s head. You must go north and find a new head to replace it. Quickly now! Go and cut off the head of the first living creature you encounter.”

So Shiva’s attendants set out for the north. The first creature they saw was a baby elephant with a single tusk. With the stroke of a sword, they cut off its head. Then they raced back to their master.

Shiva placed the elephant’s head on Ganesha’s shoulders. The other gods recited prayers as he sprinkled holy water on the body. At the touch of the blessed water, the boy began to stretch and yawn. He arose, as if from a long sleep. The little god was short, round, and jolly. His elephant’s face was as red as a rose and as bright as the moon.



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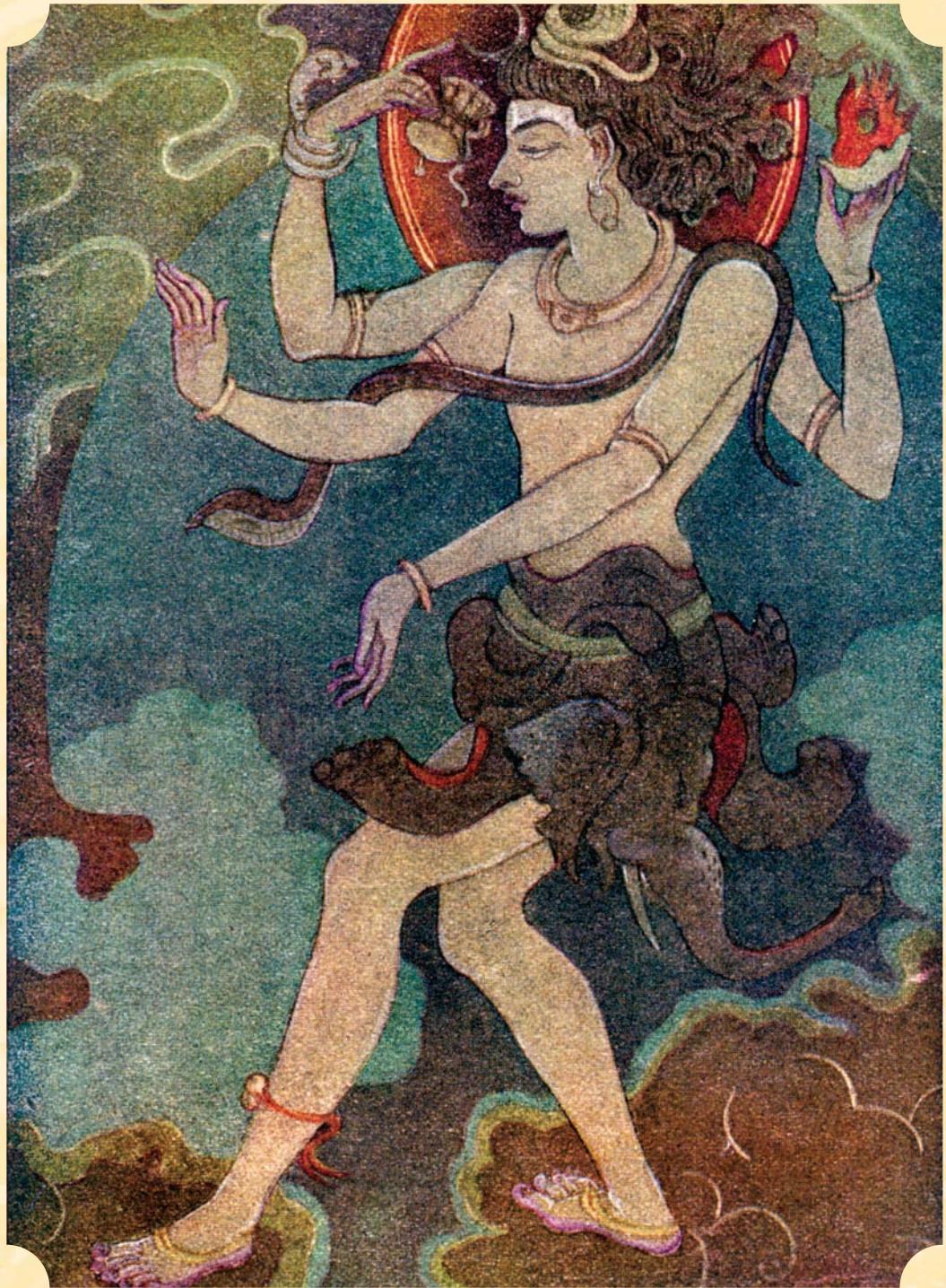
**THE GOD WAS RATHER SHORT AND FAT, WITH  
THE LOTUS FACE OF A KING OF ELEPHANTS.**

—BRHADDHARMA PURANA

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When Parvati saw her precious son restored to life, she wept with happiness. In the mother's eyes, the little boy was perfect, elephant's head and all. The gods honored the marvelous child and rejoiced at the end of the world's suffering.

For his part, Shiva greeted Ganesha with affection. "My son, you shall be as strong and wise as the elephant," said the great god. "Let all those who create obstacles become afraid at the mere thought of you. Let all those beginning a journey or a worthy project remember you. From now on, Ganesha shall be honored as the remover of obstacles, who smiles good fortune on all undertakings."



A halo of flames surrounds Shiva as he dances the universe into destruction.



## THE ANCIENT INDIANS SPEAK

### *The DANCE of SHIVA*

As we saw in our first myth, "Brahma Emerges from the Lotus Flower," the Hindus believe that time is an endless cycle. Each cycle of time has four ages. By the end of the fourth age, life on earth has become hopelessly evil and corrupt. At that point Shiva destroys the universe by performing a magical dance. Shiva's destructive dance is also an act of creation. He dissolves the world so that its eternal energies can return to the vast milky sea. There they sleep until it is time for Brahma to emerge and create the universe all over again.

In the following selection from the Puranas, a group of holy men witness Shiva's celestial dance. The passage reflects some of the many different sides of this wise and kindly, fierce and wrathful god. Shiva's complex personality has earned him more than a thousand different names, including two that appear below: Mahadeva ("Great God") and Rudra ("Roarer" or "Howler").

The blessed supreme lord began to dance, revealing his supernal [heavenly] divine nature. The [holy men] witnessed the lord Mahadeva, the ultimate abode of splendor, dancing . . . in the cloudless sky. . . .

The Brahmins saw Rudra dancing in the sky, that supreme liberator who instantly releases people from their ignorance, who is kind and benevolent to his devotees, the god with a thousand heads, a thousand feet, a thousand arms and forms, with matted hair, the crown of his head adorned with the crescent moon, clothed in a tiger-skin, holding a trident in his huge hand, bearing a staff, with the sun, moon and fire as his splendor. He was terrible to behold, with gaping mouth, projecting fangs, blazing forth like ten million suns, standing at the same time both inside and outside the egg,\* emitting the incandescent fire that burns the whole world at the end of time. Thus the [holy men] beheld the dance of the lord god who fashioned the universe.

\* According to some Hindu myths, the world was born from a golden egg.





## STORIES *of* *the* BUDDHA

### *Jataka Tales*

SO FAR, ALL OF THE MYTHS IN THIS BOOK HAVE COME from India's oldest and most enduring faith, Hinduism. Ancient India was also the birthplace of several other major world religions, including Buddhism. The Buddhist faith emerged around the sixth century BCE. Its founder was an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama (sih-DAR-tuh GOW-tuh-muh), also known as the Buddha, or "Enlightened One." The Buddha rejected the caste system and the complex rituals and sacrifices of the Brahman priests. His new faith offered people of all classes a path to salvation, based on a set of strict moral guidelines. The Buddha urged his followers to practice love and charity toward all beings. They should not lie, steal, cheat on their husbands or wives, drink alcohol, or kill any living thing. Virtuous people who followed the Buddhist path could eventually achieve release from the cycle of reincarnation, entering a state of eternal bliss called nirvana.

*Opposite:*  
Hundreds  
of tales are  
told about  
the Buddha,  
who founded  
a faith based  
on love and  
compassion.

During the Mauryan Empire, Buddhism became India's dominant religion, with millions of followers from all classes. Merchants carried the Buddha's teachings along trade routes to central Asia, Southeast Asia, and China. The people of India also continued to worship their ancient Hindu gods. Gradually, Brahman priests adopted many aspects of Buddhism and other rival faiths. By the ninth century BCE, Buddhism had begun to die out in India, even as it became a major religion in other lands.

Most of India's Buddhist myths revolve around the Buddha himself. An ancient set of texts known as the Jataka ("birth") tales includes more than five hundred stories about the Buddha's past lives. These entertaining stories tell of the many times Siddhartha was reborn as an animal or a human in the course of his spiritual journey toward enlightenment. The Jataka tales also illustrate the different teachings of Buddhism. Our first story, "A Spring in the Desert," reminds us to keep trying until we reach our goals. "The Pigeon and the Crow" is a tale about the dangers of greed. "The Banyan Deer" introduces us to a noble deer king who demonstrates the Buddhist ideals of generosity, love, and compassion.



### CAST *of* CHARACTERS

**the Buddha** (Boo-duh) Founder of Buddhism

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## *A Spring in the Desert*

ONCE UPON A TIME, the Buddha was born into a trader's family. He grew up to become a prosperous merchant, who often traveled to other countries to sell his goods. On one occasion this merchant led a caravan of five hundred carts across a sandy desert. During the day, the desert sand grew as hot as a bed of burning coals. No creature—not even the oxen pulling the wagons—could bear to walk upon it. Because of this, the caravan had to travel at night. Each dawn the travelers formed their carts in a great circle and spread an awning overhead. All day long they sat in the shade. When the sun went down, they yoked their oxen to the carts and moved forward. A "desert pilot" led them through the cool of the night, plotting their course by the stars in the heavens.

AS SOON AS THE SUN  
GOT UP, [THE  
DESERT] GREW AS  
HOT AS A BED OF  
CHARCOAL-EMBERS.

—JATAKA NO. 2

After a few nights of traveling in this way, the caravan had used up nearly all its water. The merchant judged that one more night would bring them to the end of the desert. The people yoked the oxen to the carts and set out on the final leg of their journey. But the pilot was very tired. As he sat on the lead cart, gazing up at the stars, his head began to nod. After a while he fell asleep. All night long the oxen plodded around and around in a big circle. The next morning the people of the caravan saw that they were right back where they had camped the night before.

“All our water is gone!” cried the desperate travelers. “We will not survive another day in this wilderness!” Then they flung themselves down beneath their carts, weeping over their misfortune.

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**THOUGHT THE  
[MERCHANT] TO  
HIMSELF, “IF I GIVE  
IN, EVERY SINGLE  
ONE WILL PERISH.”**

~JATAKA NO. 2

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Only the merchant refused to lose heart. “If I give in to despair, every single one of us will perish,” the man said to himself. So he began to walk back and forth. He searched the ground until he found a small clump of grass. He knew that no plant could grow in the desert unless there was water beneath it.

“Bring the shovels!” the merchant shouted. “We must dig a well at this spot!” His words roused a few

of the travelers, and they began to dig. The thirsty men kept digging until they hit a large rock. At that, they threw down their shovels. “This is a waste of effort,” they complained. “We are finished. Let us die in peace.”

But still the merchant would not give up. He climbed down into the hole and pressed his ear to the rock. He was almost sure that he could hear the faint murmur of water. Climbing out again, he called to a young servant boy: “Take courage, my lad. Go down into the hole with this sledgehammer and strike the rock.”

The resolute boy obeyed his master's bidding. He went down into the hole and delivered a mighty blow with the hammer. The rock split in two, and water spouted up as tall as a palm tree.

All the people laughed with joy as they drank and bathed in the cool, clear water. They cooked their rice and ate it. They fed and watered their oxen. When the sun set, they raised a flag so that other caravans could find the new spring in the desert. Then they traveled on safely to their destination.

## *The Pigeon and the Crow*

**O**NCE UPON A TIME, the Buddha was born as a pigeon. In those days people used to hang up straw baskets as nests for birds. A cook who worked for a wealthy merchant put one of these nest-baskets in his kitchen. The pigeon lived in the basket, flying out in search of food each morning and returning home each evening.

One day a crow flew over the rich man's house. He smelled the fresh fish hanging in the kitchen. Perching on a nearby branch, he saw the pigeon returning to his basket. "Aha!" thought the crow. "I can use that dull creature to win my way into that fine kitchen."

So the next day, when the pigeon went out to seek his food, the crow stuck to him like a shadow. "Why do you follow me, friend?" asked the pigeon.

"I admire your calm and gentle manner," answered the crow. "Let me stay with you and learn from your example."

"You and I eat different kinds of food, friend," said the pigeon. "You will have a hard time of it if you attach yourself to me."



"Whatever you eat, I will eat," replied the crow.  
"So be it," said the pigeon.

All that day the pigeon fluttered about as usual, contentedly pecking up grass seeds. The crow pretended to eat seeds, too. But when the pigeon wasn't looking, his greedy companion turned over lumps of cow dung and gobbled up the fat worms beneath them.

After a while the pigeon and the crow flew back to the rich merchant's house. When the cook saw that the pigeon had brought a friend, he hung up a second basket. For the next few

days, the two birds lived together peacefully in the kitchen.

Then, early one morning, the cook hung up a fresh supply of fish. How the crow longed for a taste! He lay down and began to moan loudly.

"Come along, friend, time for breakfast," called the pigeon.

"You go without me," replied the crow. "I have a terrible pain in my belly."

"I have never heard of a crow with a stomachache," said the pigeon. "Come now, that fish is for people, not crows. Do not give in to your greed."

"Why, what are you saying?  
I'm much too sick to go out!"

"Very well, your own actions



will show the truth. Be careful now!" said the pigeon. And away he flew.

The cook spent the morning preparing the fish. Steam filled the kitchen, along with a mouthwatering fragrance. After a while the man went to stand outside the door, wiping the sweat from his brow.

Out popped the crow's head from the basket. "Now's my chance," he thought, and he swooped down on the cook pot. *Click!* He latched on to the edge with his claws. *Splash!* He stuck in his head and pulled out a big lump of fish.

"What's that noise?" said the cook, running back into the kitchen. "Why, there's that rascally crow. I'll teach him to spoil my master's dinner!" Quickly the man shut the door.

He caught the crow and plucked out all its shiny black feathers. He dunked the bird's raw body in a pickling paste of buttermilk, salt, and ginger. Then he threw the poor creature back into its nest-basket.

By and by, the pigeon came back and saw the crow lying there, groaning in pain. "Ah, my friend," said he, "you would not listen. Now you are paying the price for your greed." Then the pigeon flew away to find a new home. As for the crow, he soon died, and the cook threw him on the dust heap.

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**THE GREEDY CROW . . .**  
**SCORNED THE PIGEON'S**  
**WARNING WORDS.**

—JATAKA NO. 42

## *The Banyan Deer*

**O**NCE UPON A TIME, the Buddha was born as a deer. His coat was golden, and his horns sparkled like silver. His round eyes were as bright as jewels, and his mouth was as red as the reddest berries. As he grew up, a herd of five hundred deer gathered around him, and he became known as King Banyan Deer.

Banyan Deer and his herd lived in a large wooded park belonging to the king of Benares, in northern India. In the same forest dwelt another golden deer. His name was Branch Deer, and he had his own herd of five hundred followers. Now, the king of Benares liked to eat meat at every meal. Some days he would go hunting in the royal forest. Other days he would send his cook to shoot a deer for his supper. But the king gave orders that the two magnificent golden deer should never be harmed.

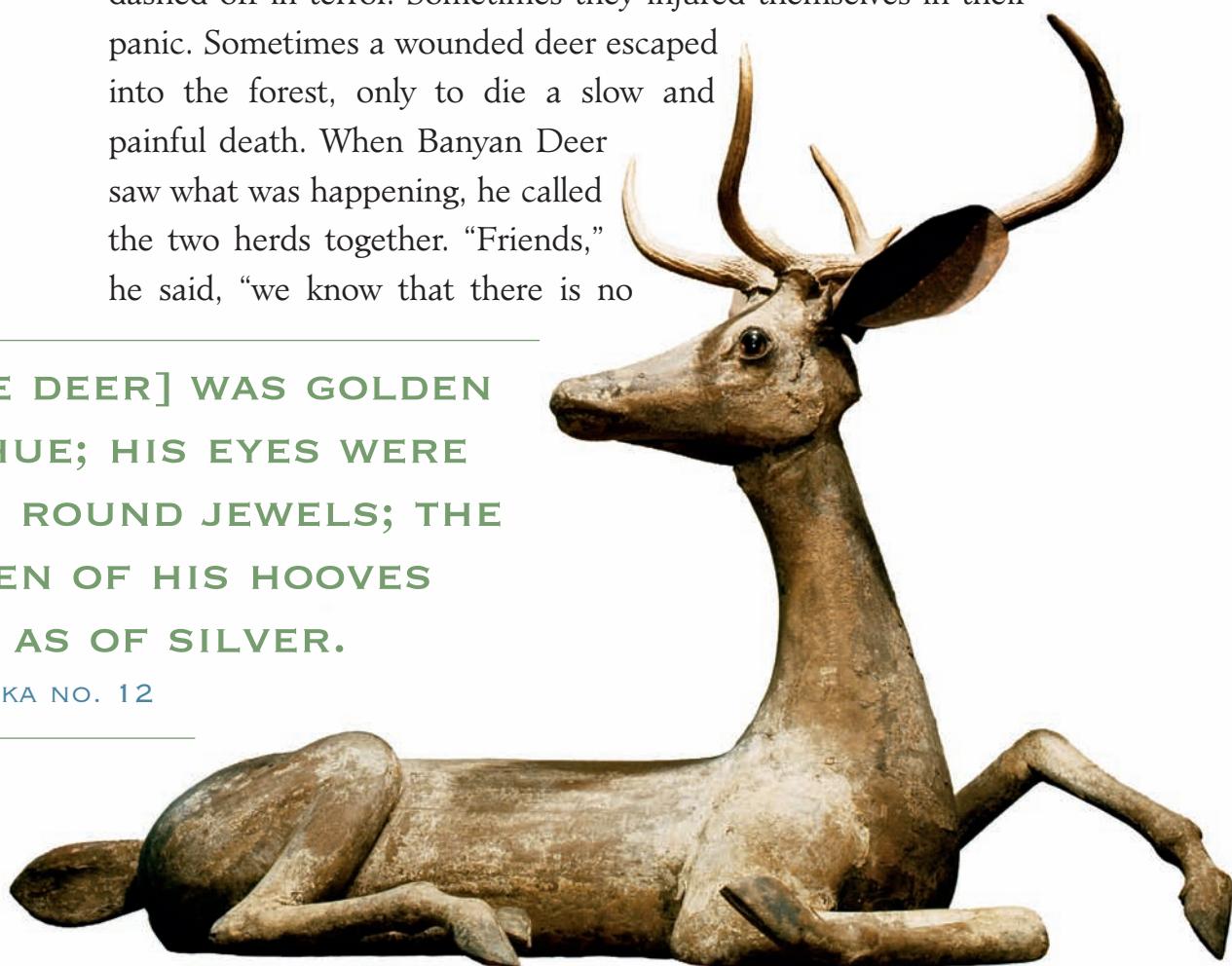
Whenever the herds of deer saw the hunter's bow, they naturally dashed off in terror. Sometimes they injured themselves in their panic. Sometimes a wounded deer escaped into the forest, only to die a slow and painful death. When Banyan Deer saw what was happening, he called the two herds together. "Friends," he said, "we know that there is no

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**[THE DEER] WAS GOLDEN  
OF HUE; HIS EYES WERE  
LIKE ROUND JEWELS; THE  
SHEEN OF HIS HOOVES  
WAS AS OF SILVER.**

~JATAKA NO. 12

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escape from death, but this needless suffering can be prevented. Let us go to the chopping block by turns, one day a deer from my herd and the next day one from Branch Deer's. This way only one victim will be taken each day, and the rest can live in peace." All the deer agreed to the plan. From then on, they drew lots. The deer who was chosen would go willingly to the place of execution and lay its head on the block.

One day the lot fell to a pregnant doe from Branch Deer's herd. She went to her king and begged him to pass her over until after her fawn was born. But Branch Deer would not listen. "The rules cannot be changed," he said. "It is your turn to die."

In despair the doe went to Banyan Deer. As soon as he heard her story, the compassionate deer king said, "Go in peace. I will find another to take your place." Then he went and laid his own golden head upon the chopping block.

When the royal cook came to the place of execution, he was astonished to see the golden deer with his head on the block. The man ran off to the palace. Soon the king came riding up on his chariot. "O king of the deer," he said to Banyan Deer, "why are you lying here? Did I not promise to spare your life?"

"O king of men, there was a pregnant doe who begged me to let her turn pass," said Banyan Deer. "I could not ask another to take her place, so I have come myself."

"Never before have I seen such love and generosity," said the king. "Arise! I spare both your life and hers."

"So two will be safe," said Banyan Deer. "What shall the other deer in your park do, O king of men?"

"Their lives too I spare," the king answered.

"So the deer in your royal park will be safe. What shall the rest of the deer in your kingdom do?"

“Their lives too I spare.”

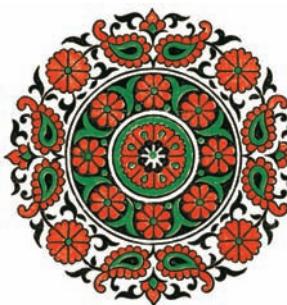
“So all the deer will be safe. What shall the rest of the four-footed animals do?”

“Their lives too I spare.”

“So the four-footed animals will be safe. What shall the flocks of birds and the fish in the water do?”

“Their lives too I spare. Henceforth no one shall hunt or kill any creature of the land, sky, or water.”

At that, Banyan Deer raised his head from the chopping block, having secured protection for all living things. Then the lord of the deer taught the ways of righteousness and justice to the king of men. For the rest of his life, the king lived by the Buddha’s teachings. And after a long life spent in good works, he passed away and entered the bliss of heaven.



## GLOSSARY

**archaeologists** scientists who study the physical remains of past cultures to learn about human life and activity

**Aryans** (AH-ree-unz) a nomadic people who migrated into northern India around 1500 BCE, bringing the religious beliefs that would develop into Hinduism and the social groupings that would become the caste system

**ascetic** (uh-SEH-tick) a man who gave up home, family, and possessions to devote himself to a life of religious devotion

**Brahmans** (BRAH-munz) members of the top caste in Indian society, traditionally made up of priests

**Buddhism** the religion based on the teachings of the sixth-century BCE Indian wise man Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, or “Enlightened One”

**castes** the Western term for India’s *varnas*, or system of social classes

**dharma** (DAR-muh) the religious and social duties that are divinely assigned to each individual according to his or her caste

**epic** a long narrative poem celebrating the deeds of legendary or historical beings

**hermitage** a religious retreat where a Hindu sage or group of sages lived in peace and tranquility; also called an ashram

**Hinduism** the dominant religion of both ancient and modern India, which embraces a wide variety of scriptures, beliefs, and practices

**incarnation** the earthly form of a god or goddess

**Jainism** a religion founded in India in the sixth century BCE, which teaches that salvation can be achieved through a life of nonviolence, meditation, vegetarianism, fasting, and other forms of devotion and self-denial

**Kshatriyas** (kshuh-TREE-uhz) members of the second caste in Indian society, traditionally made up of government leaders and warriors

**legend** a traditional story that may involve ordinary mortals as well as divine beings and may be partly based on real people and events

**monsoon** a strong wind that blows north from the Indian Ocean in the summer, bringing heavy rains to the Indian subcontinent; *monsoon* can also refer to the rains themselves or to the rainy season

**mythology** the whole body of myths belonging to a people

**myths** traditional stories about gods and other divine beings, which were developed by ancient cultures to explain the mysteries of the physical and spiritual worlds

**nymphs** beautiful divine beings who dwell in Indra's heaven

**primeval** original; existing before all others

**reincarnation** the rebirth of a person's soul in a new body

**sage** an extremely wise person

**Shudras** the lowest caste in Indian society, traditionally made up of servants, laborers, and craftspeople

**Vaishya** (VAISH-yuh) the third caste in Indian society, traditionally made up of farmers and merchants

## SOURCES *of the MYTHS*

The myths retold in this book are based mainly on the following ancient Indian texts:



### Jataka Tales (“Birth Stories”)

The Jataka tales are an ancient collection of some 550 stories about the past lives of the Buddha, founder of the Buddhist religion. Each Jataka has four parts. It opens with a preface that explains the events in the Buddha's life that led him to tell the particular birth story. Next comes the story itself. At the end there is a short summary, in which the Buddha explains which character he represents in the tale, along with the present-day identities of all the other characters (who have also been reborn again and again). There is also a short verse illustrating the moral of the story. Some of the Jatakas were probably told by the Buddha himself, while others were developed later by his followers. The tales were collected and written down several centuries after the death of the Buddha, traditionally dated at 483 BCE.

## The Mahabharata (“Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty”)

The epic poem the Mahabharata was composed during the Vedic period and handed down orally for centuries before it was first recorded around 500 BCE. It consists of nearly 100,000 verses, which may make it the world’s longest poem. It tells an interlocking series of stories about the rivalry between two royal families, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The most famous segment of the epic is the Bhagavad Gita (“Song of the Blessed One”), a message from the god Krishna on the meaning of life and the importance of fulfilling one’s dharma.



## The Puranas (“Stories of Old”)

The Puranas are a collection of sacred texts on the beliefs, practices, and myths of Hinduism, which were composed in the period from about 300 to 1000 CE. They include eighteen major texts (known as the Great Puranas) and at least eighteen minor texts. Drawing on old stories told and retold over hundreds of years, these texts are our most extensive source of Hindu mythology.

## The Ramayana (“Career of Rama”)

The Ramayana tells the story of the mortal prince Rama, who is believed to have been the seventh incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. This epic poem consists of 24,000 verses divided into seven books. It is traditionally said to have been composed by the Indian sage Valmiki. Modern-day scholars believe that the poem may actually have been compiled by a number of different poets, beginning around 200 BCE, with revisions and new text added over the next four hundred years.



## The Vedas (“Knowledge”)

The Vedas are the most ancient sacred texts of Hinduism, dating back more than three thousand years. They consist mainly of four books. The oldest and most important text, the Rig-Veda, contains more than one thousand hymns praising the Hindu gods, goddesses, and other divine

beings. Three supplements were added later: the Sama-Veda (a collection of sacred songs), the Yajur-Veda (rules and verses for sacrifices), and the Atharva-Veda (magic spells).

## To FIND OUT MORE

### BOOKS

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### WEB SITES

*Ancient India* at <http://www.ancientindia.co.uk>

This excellent site from the British Museum includes lots of useful information on the geography, history, culture, and beliefs of ancient India. Click on “Early Hinduism” for an ancient creation story and information on the Hindu gods and goddesses.

*Encyclopedia Mythica: Hindu Mythology* at <http://www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/asia/hindu/articles.html>  
This online encyclopedia offers more than three hundred brief articles on the gods, goddesses, demons, animals, and other aspects of Hindu mythology.

*History for Kids: Ancient India* at <http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/india/index.htm>

*History for Kids* is an educational site presented by a history professor at Portland State University. The section on ancient India includes easy-to-read information on a wide variety of topics, including history, art, science, daily life, and religion.

*Internet Sacred Text Archive: World Religions* at  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/world.htm>

The *Internet Sacred Text Archive* is an online library of texts on religion, mythology, and related topics, which have been scanned from the original books and articles. Click on “Buddhism,” “Hinduism,” or “Jainism” for a variety of primary texts from those three India-born religions.

*Windows to the Universe: World Mythology* at

[http://www.windows.ucar.edu/tour/link=/mythology/worldmap\\_new.html](http://www.windows.ucar.edu/tour/link=/mythology/worldmap_new.html)  
Created by the University of Michigan, this excellent site gives visitors a choice of text presented at beginning, intermediate, or advanced levels. Click on “Hindu” on the world map to learn about Hindu myths related to the sun, the moon, and other objects in the sky.

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### NOTES *on QUOTATIONS*

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“The Fate of Bali,” page 43, from the Vayu Purana, translated by Wendy Doniger, in *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975).

“The Wisdom of Krishna,” page 56, from *Bhagavad Gita: A New Translation*, translated by Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harmony Books, 2000).

“Kali the Destroyer,” page 65, from the Markandeya Purana; and “The Dance of Shiva,” page 75, from the Kurma Purana, translated by Cornelia Dimmitt and J. A. B. van Buitenen, in *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978).

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## ABOUT *the AUTHOR*



“I can’t think of a better way to learn about the people of ancient cultures than by reading the stories that held their deepest hopes and fears, their most cherished values and beliefs. While collecting these sacred tales, I looked for the elements that set each culture apart: the special music of the language, the differing roles of men and women, the unique ways of interpreting the mysteries of life. I also enjoyed discovering the many feelings and experiences that unite all peoples around the world, both past and present. Pueblo storyteller Harold Littlebird said it best: ‘We know we all come from story. They may not all be the same story but there is a same-ness. There is a oneness in it all.’”

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