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The Supreme One & His Many Forms

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THE Vedic or Hindu religion is often criticised as being polytheistic, boasting thousands of deities (demigods and demigoddesses). Even among Hindus there is no clear understanding for the need for so many of them.

It is faith in God that sustains mankind. For man God is a psychological necessity. Almost instinctively man turns to the Almighty in times of a crisis.

All religions agree that there is only one God, one Supreme Being. Only, different people perceive Him in different forms. The Rig Veda (1.164.46) says, "Truth is One; sages call It by various names." Why does Hinduism then subscribe to so many deities?

To suit the varied material and emotional needs and varied tastes of human beings, God appears in the form that each would like to worship Him. As Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita (4.11), "O Partha! Whosoever worships Me through whatever path, I verily accept and bless them in that way. Men everywhere follow My path."

According to Vedic scriptures the innumerable Hindu demigods are energies of the One Supreme Being embodied in different forms. They are mere vassals empowered to serve particular functions specific to the positions they occupy. To their worshippers they can grant material boons in varying degrees. All demigods, right up to Lord Brahma, the creator of life on the innumerable universes, are jivas (living entities), and aspiring human beings can, on attaining the necessary extraordinary religious merit, attain the position of demigods.

Although the ultimate goal of man is liberation from material life, Vedic texts do not decry worship of deities for material welfare and benefits such as cure of diseases, acquisition of wealth, success in certain ventures, fulfilment of desires and so on. When worship of a particular deity fulfils the devotee's prayer he becomes a votary of that deity. The devotee chooses his deity according to his desires, which are governed by the three gunas (modes of material nature) — sattva (goodness), rajas (passion) and tamas (ignorance). The sattvic devotee will adore the Supreme Being for spiritual elevation and liberation; the rajasic will worship such deities that will give him

wealth and power; and the tamasic will pray to lesser deities and psychic forces like spirits of dead ancestors for overpowering and controlling other beings.

The fruits granted by demigods are, however, limited. Lord Krishna says (Gita 7.23), "The results accruing from the prayers to devas (demigods) of such small-minded people are finite only. Those who worship the devas go to the devas, but My devotees attain to Me." And, although the worshipper believes that the demigod grants his wishes, it is actually the Supreme Lord who fulfils his prayers. Says Krishna (Gita 7.22), "With faith the votary worships a particular deva and obtains the fruit of that worship, but these are granted by Me alone."

The thousands of demigods in the Hindu pantheon are empowered to bestow material favours and, to a deserving few, inculcate spiritual awakening, but they cannot grant liberation. Only unalloyed devotion to the Supreme Being can lead one to moksha (liberation) through jnana (knowledge) and bhakti (love of God). Though the Lord also does grant material benefits to His devotees, seeking petty favours from Him would be like asking for peanuts from a king. Nevertheless, the Lord encourages such seekers to approach Him directly, because in remembering Him they would benefit spiritually as well.

Often votaries confuse demigods with the Lord's incarnations. While demigods are limited expressions of the Lord's power, an incarnation is hypostatic with, and hence non-different from, the Supreme Being Himself. There are many categories of avatars who descend onto this earth in various forms from time to time. The Puranas admit ten main avatars of the Lord — Matsya (fish), Kurma (turtle), Varaha (boar), Narsimhadeva (man-lion), Vamanadeva (dwarf), Parasurama (man of power), Rama (Divine warrior), Krishna (Divine lover), Buddha (Divine sage), and Kalki (divine saviour, yet to come). It requires the Lord's grace for one to recognise Him in an avatar, and many fail to do so even when He is in their midst. Many, including Duryodhana and Sisupala, did not recognise Lord Krishna as God although face to face with Him when He walked this earth.



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