

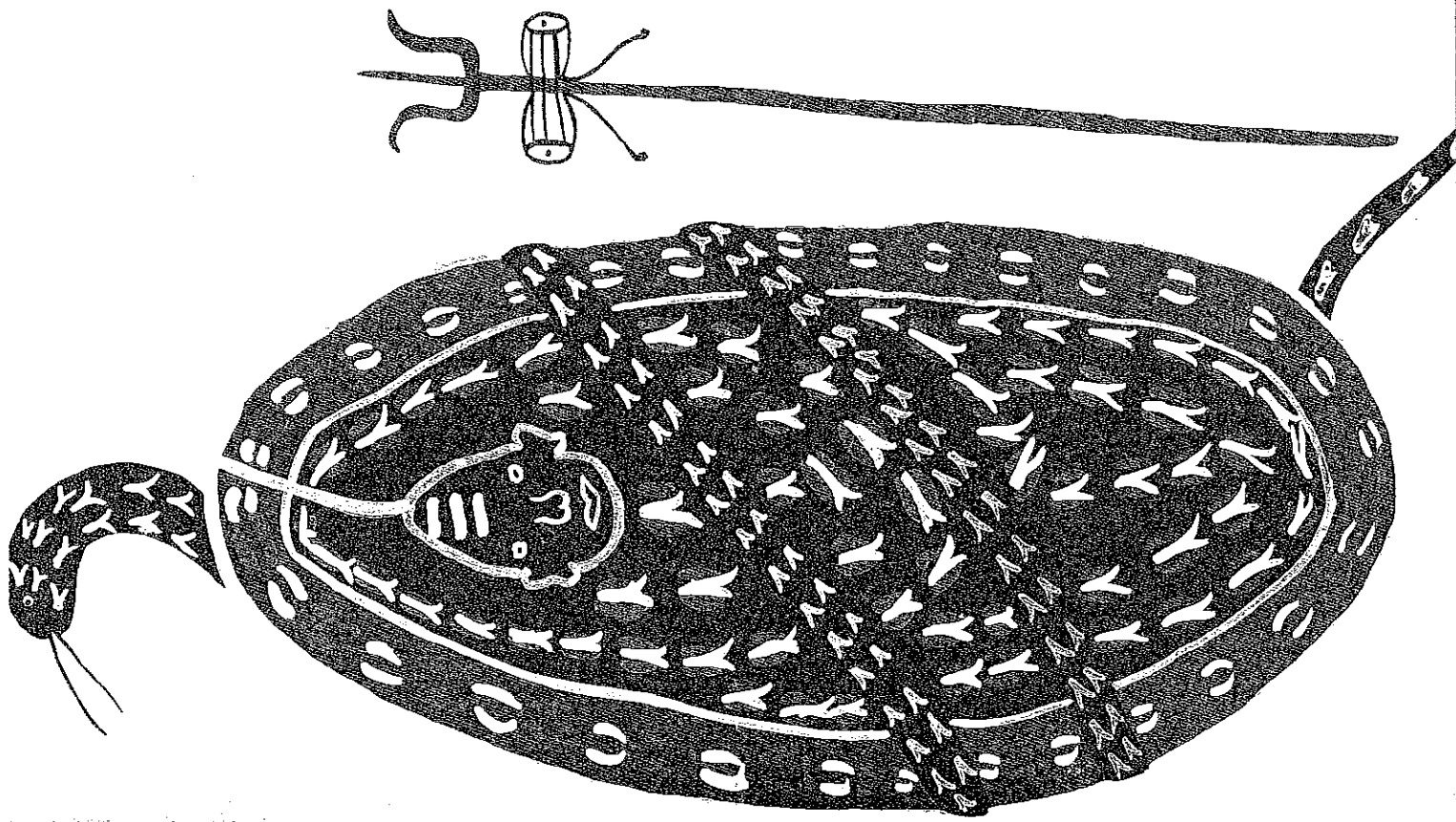
Shiva and the Goddess

Whereas Vishnu is constant and easily definable in his fight for righteousness, Shiva is the most ambiguous of the world's major deities. He is phallic, always erect, yet never sheds his semen, the Lord of the Cremation ground yet a symbol of regeneration, the paragon of the silent power of ascetic concentration and also the wild wind of change.

As Lord of Yoga, Shiva transcends the illusory nature of reality. Whereas Vishnu incarnates himself to act in this world, Shiva remains aloof, and is portrayed either meditating in hidden reaches of the Himalayas or in his abstract form as the *linga*, symbolic of the phallus. Shiva's power (*shakti*) to act in reality is embodied instead in female forms, as his consorts Sati and Parvati, and as the destroyer goddesses Kali and Durga, all of whom are in turn aspects of Devi, the great Goddess. The very land of India is said to be the body of the Goddess and she is thus knowable and approachable to her devotees.

Parvati is the Daughter of the Himalayas, and the stories relating her mythological life with Shiva are rooted in the mountains. With their children, the elephant-headed Ganesha and the warrior god Skanda, they are the "divine family" of Hindu myth, and their mythological lives are symbolically re-enacted by *sadhuis* (renunciants).

The head of Shiva within the yoni. (see p.66) of shakti, surrounded by a serpent and accompanied by the trident of the god, as imagined by the modern tribal artist, Janagadh Singh Shyam, who lives in Madhya Pradesh, central India.



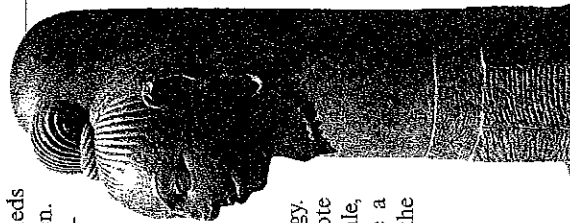
Shiva linga



A Shiva linga set in a white-marked yoni beside the Ganges at Varanasi, the city sacred to Shiva.

The *linga* (phallus) is worshipped as the incarnate form of Shiva and is a vivid representation of the god's dual nature. Although he is the god of ascetics, renunciation and yoga, Shiva is mainly worshipped as the phallus, a symbol of eroticism and sexual energy.

The Shiva *linga* is forever erect because it swells with potential creation — Shiva never sheds but always retains his semen. Even before the full emergence of the Tantric movement (see pp.110–11), which used sexual imagery to represent the union of opposites, the *linga* was depicted arising from the *yonis*, a symbol of the vulva or of female energy. The *linga* and the *yonis* denote the union of male and female, heaven and earth, and are a powerful representation of the totality of existence.

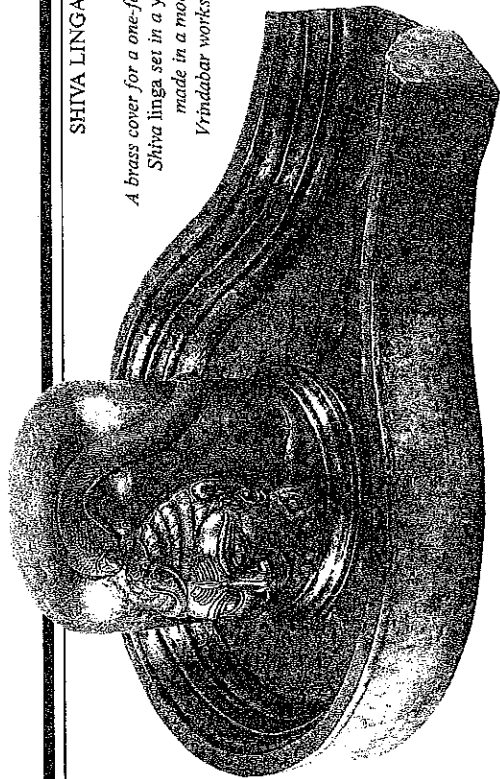


An *ekamukha Shiva linga* in red sandstone from a 5th-century temple in central India.

IMAGES OF SHIVA

The *ekamukha linga*, which has an image of Shiva carved upon one side, is a "bridge" between the abstract and iconic forms of the deity. Shiva is also sometimes represented with four or five heads, signifying his various aspects. One head may show him as Bhairava, his incarnation as a wild ascetic, others may portray him in his wrathful, meditative or hermaphrodite form.

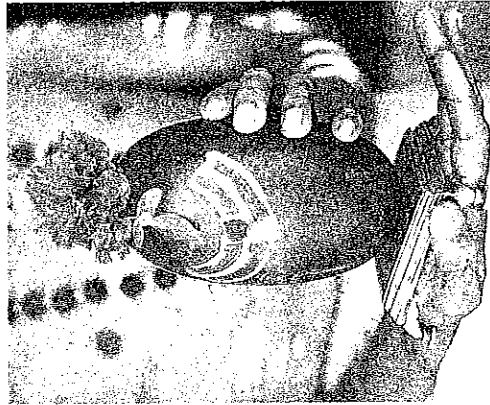
A brass cover for a one-faced Shiva linga set in a yoni, made in a modern Vrindabar workshop.



gods, when suddenly a great pillar of fire appeared from the waters — it was so tall that it seemed to be unending.

The two gods set out to discover the height and depth of the pillar. Vishnu assumed the form of a boar and dived into the water, while Brahma turned himself into a swan and flew as high as he could. Both returned amazed that they had failed to find the pillar's extremities. Shiva then appeared and explained that the flaming pillar was the cosmic form of the *linga*, the earthly symbol of his incarnate power.

A quite different legend describing the origin of the Shiva *linga* tells of a group of sages who were practising asceticism in the forest without an adequate understanding of the greatness of Shiva. To punish them, Shiva appeared as a naked yogi, filthy from performing austerities, and seduced the sages' wives. Furious, the ascetics castrated him, but, at the moment that his *linga* fell to the ground, the universe was engulfed in darkness. The sages realized their error and begged Shiva to restore light to the world. He agreed on condition that, from that time onward, the sages should worship him in the form of the *linga*.



A self-manifested linga (see below), made from a river-washed stone, decorated with sandalwood paste and a fresh hibiscus.

LINGA WORSHIP

Lingas are usually carved from stone, but they can also be fashioned in sand or made from pebbles or an antihill. Particularly sacred are the *svayambhu* ("self-manifested") *lingas* that appear in natural formations, such as the Amamath *linga* that is formed from ice. The *linga*, as with any icon, is often anointed with milk and ghee, and offerings of fruits, sweets, leaves and flowers are placed on it.

Snakes, cows and bulls

In Indian art and religion, cows, bulls and snakes (particularly the cobra) have a powerful symbolic value. They are specifically sacred to Shiva, but elements of snake (*naga*) and cow worship are evident in the attributes and myths of most of the major Hindu deities. Snakes and cows draw much of their symbolic power from their ambiguity: the snake is both a destroyer and a guardian of human life, while the cow's fertility and nurturing qualities are balanced by the bull's more aggressive instincts.

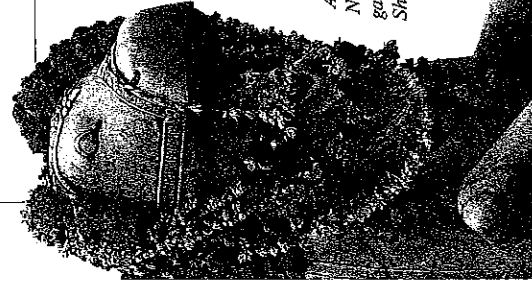
The worship of snake deities is thought to have preceded the Vedic religion of the Aryan warrior invaders (see pp.12-13), and is still very common in rural southern India.

The importance of *naga* cults is evident from the prevalence of *naga* deities

NANDI

The respect that is accorded the bull in modern-day India is a consequence of its association with Shiva. Shiva's mount is the great white bull Nandi whom the Hindu god

A statue of the sacred bull Nandi, decorated with a garland of flowers, from a Shiva temple in Varanasi.

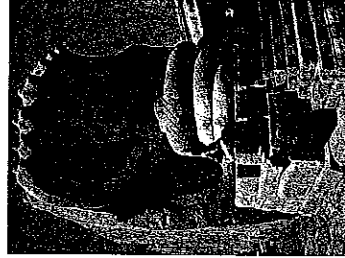


In some Hindu cities, such as Varanasi, sacred animals are allowed to roam freely.



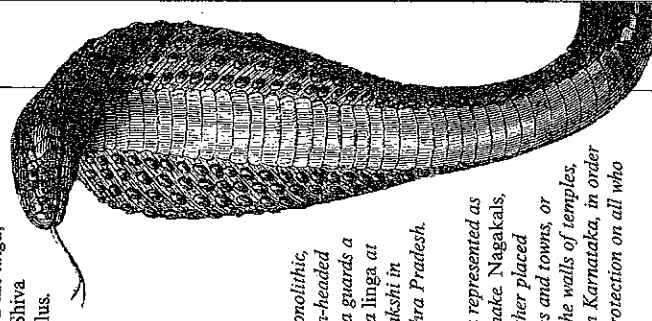
THE COBRA

The antithetical nature of Shiva as creator and destroyer, ascetic and erotic, is shared by one of his most important attendant symbols, the cobra. The cobra is lethal, yet it adorns Shiva's neck as protection. Similarly, Shiva's son, Ganesha (see



pp.72-3), is guarded by cobras about his ankles and his chest; and Murgan — originally a Tamil deity, but later identified as another of Shiva's sons (see pp.76-7) — rides a peacock with a cobra in its mouth. Cobras also guard the *linga*, the Shiva phallus.

A monolithic, seven-headed cobra guards a Shiva linga at Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh.



Snake deities are often represented as half-human and half-snake. Nagakals, or snake stones, are either placed beneath trees in villages and towns, or they are displayed on the walls of temples, as in this example from Karnataka, in order to bestow auspicious protection on all who come to worship.



who was overawed by the Buddha's powers of concentration. The serpent prince Dharanendra shields the Jain Formaker, Parshva, in his meditations, while in Vaishnavite myth, the great serpent Ananta protects Vishnu while he rests.

The cow in Hindu mythology has always represented fertility and abundance. As the complete provider, the cow is the incarnate form of the benign aspect of the Great Goddess, she who nourishes and sustains the life that emerges from her "infinite womb". More recently, the cow has come to stand for "Mother India", the mythical embodiment of the modern Indian state. Cows are allowed to roam freely through the streets and are considered sacred by the Hindus. Large white bulls that resemble the mythical Nandi are often honoured with elaborate funerals.

in the major Indian religions. The great serpent Shesha is the "endless one" in Hindu myth, whose form embodies the Milky Way, and whose four great coils stand for the four *yugas* (world ages) of cosmic time. Buddhist myth recounts the tale of Muchilinda, a snake-king

rides into battle against the demons. In many Shaivite temples a statue of Nandi faces the entrance to the main shrine so that he may watch over his master — he is the most loyal of the deity's protectors. Paintings which represent the "divine family" of Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha and Skanda always include Nandi: according to legend, the bull was given to Shiva and Parvati as a wedding present from Daksha, Shiva's father-in-law.

Nandi shares many of his master's attributes: he is strong, fierce and sexually potent and is an embodiment of the power that can be attained by the taming of brute strength and by the control of passion.

Sadhus



The greatest congregation of sadhus occurs at the Kumbha Mela at Allahabad every twelve years.

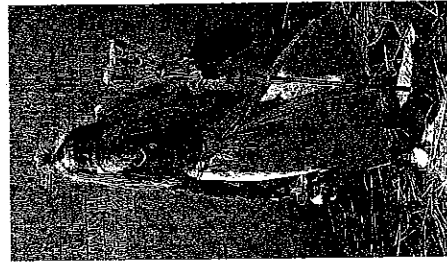
Sadhus (yogis) follow a path of penance and austerity to attain enlightenment. Believing the world to be made by the creative force of *maya* (illusion), *sadhus* are renunciants, rejecting worldly attachments and a life of "action" to erase past *karma* (see pp.24-5) and so liberate themselves into the world of divine reality. The extreme austerity of some *sadhus* does not mark them as religious fanatics in India. They are a common sight on the country's roads, and renunciation can also be the "fourth stage" of asceticism - after bringing up a family - in an orthodox Hindu's life.

Many *sadhus* imitate the mythological life of Shiva, the greatest of all ascetics. They carry a symbolic trident and wear three stripes of ash upon their foreheads to

represent Shiva's triple aspect and his ascetic quest to destroy the three impurities - selfishness, action with desire and *maya*. The ascetic's two-sided drum (*damaru*) represents the union of Shiva and Shakti, and by worshipping the *linga* (see pp.66-7) ascetics honour Shiva's manifest form. The saffron-coloured robes or loin cloths worn by many *sadhus* signify that they have been symbolically washed in the fertile blood of Parvati, Shiva's consort. Their presence at many of the sites of Shaivite myth confirms their devotion to this god.

Sadhus usually spend the first years of renunciation with their gurus, or teachers, performing the selfless service of *karma* yoga. Traditionally,

A sadhu posing for tourists outside the palace at Amber.



sadhus shave their heads as a sign of renunciation and surrender to their gurus, to whom lifelong attachments are made. Once fully acquainted with the spiritual and yogic arts, they usually leave their gurus' protection to wander the roads and forests, never staying long in one place. At this stage, they let their hair grow long and matted. *Sadhus* believe that moving around keeps the body-mind alert, but that staying in one place leads to stagnation. There are many different Shaivite sects. Aghori ascetics are devotees of

it from their hands.



A typical emblem held by sadhus is the damaru (left), the drum of Shiva, which is rattled to announce their arrival and departure from a village.

PENANCE

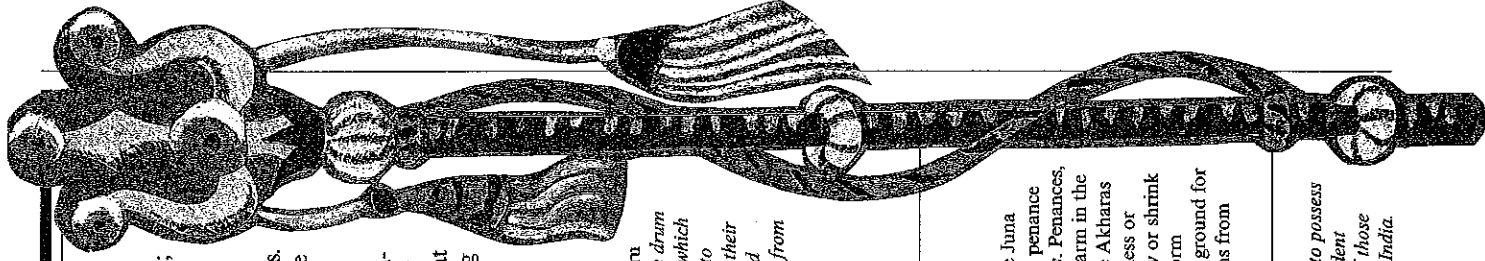
The largest number of *sadhus* belongs to the Juna Akhara sect, famous for the extremity of its penance and the yogic accomplishments of its *sadhus*. Penances, such as standing on one leg or holding one arm in the air for twelve years, are said to have lent the Akharas considerable powers (*siddhis*), such as lightness or levitation, invisibility and the ability to grow or shrink to any size. Many members of the sect perform penances such as burying their heads in the ground for several days at a time in order to attract alms from passers-by.



A sadhu buries his head in the sand as a form of penance.

The first act of a sadhu on arrival at a new site is to build a dhuni or sacred fire. A trident (right) is driven into the edge of the hearth in memory of Shiva sanctifying the fire. It is kept

clean because it is believed to possess considerable power. The trident illustrated here is typical of those used by sadhus throughout India.



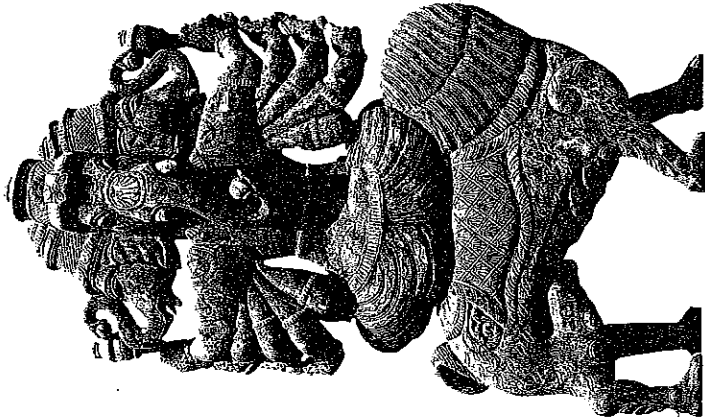
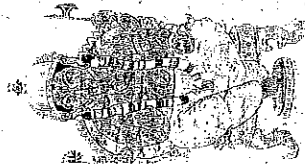
Ganesha

The elephant-headed deity Ganesha is Hinduism's Lord of Beginnings, and the benign Remover of Obstacles. His animal mount is the rat, famed for its slyness, and his immense popularity is based as much on his trickery as on his ever-jovial willingness to solve the problems of his devotees.

A typical tale of his light-hearted cunning involves a race around the world between the pot-bellied Ganesha and his fleet-footed brother, Skanda. Skanda set off in full flight on his peacock mount, while Ganesha claimed victory by simply walking around his divine parents, thus encircling the entirety of the universe.

Ganesha's image may originate from a tribal animal totem; the tales of how he acquired his animal's head are often seen as reflecting the assimilation of his tribal cult into mainstream Hinduism. He is now worshipped as a son of Shiva, yet legend has it that Shiva was not his

A wall painting of Ganesha in Jaipur.



A four-headed Ganesha riding a lion, from southern India.

true father. The most common account of his birth is that while Parvati was washing herself, she took some dirt and unguent from her leg to form a small model of a man. She gave life to the fig-

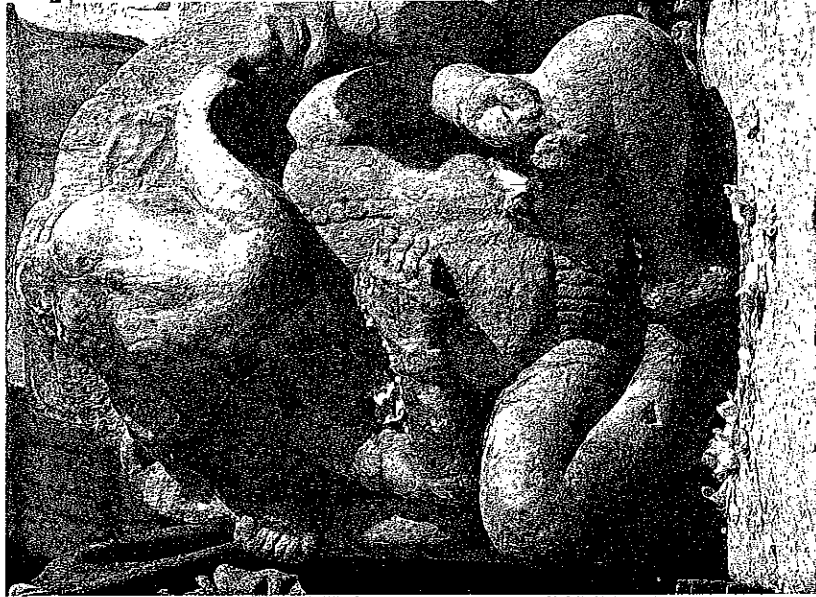
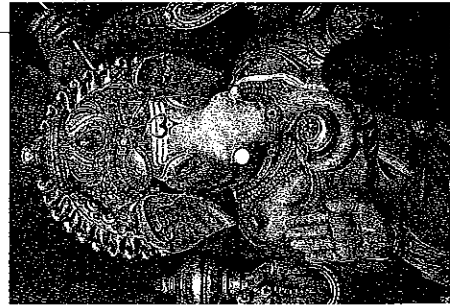
GANESHA'S ATTRIBUTES

Ganesha inherits hints of Shiva's asceticism: a cobra is coiled around his belly, and sprouts of matted hair suggest the dreadlocks of the Lord of Yoga. He is, however, too playful to be a serious ascetic. His attributes are an elephant goad, a noose and the bowl of sweetmeats eternally lifted to his mouth.

He is often depicted with one hand held upright in the gesture of fearlessness.

Ganesha is also the patron of letters and learning: the broken tusk that he holds in one of his hands was used as a stylus to write down later sections of the *Mahabharata* epic (see pp.56-7).

A painted plaster image of Ganesha carried in procession.



Above: Positioned at the entrance to a temple, Ganesha is worshipped by devotees for his power to remove obstacles, thereby ensuring success in personal and business ventures.

Right: Small images of Ganesha are mass-produced for homes.

ure, instructing him to guard the door while she bathed. Her husband, Shiva, returned to find a strange man-god in his house, and when he tried to pass through the door, Ganesha refused him entry. Furious, Shiva cut off the intruder's head, only to find that he had killed Parvati's own son. Shiva dispatched his *ganas* (attendant demons and dwarfs) to bring back the head of the first creature they met; they returned with the head of an elephant. Shiva placed this on Ganesha's shoulders and brought him back to life. He was welcomed into

the divine family, and honoured with the title Ganesha or Ganapati, Lord of Shiva's *ganas*.

Ganesha's courage while defending Parvati's door has made him the guardian of entrances and Lord of New Openings. His image is often found on entrances to temples and homes; his name is invoked at the beginning of worship and when a new journey or project is planned. Weddings are blessed by Ganesha, as are other beginnings such as the New Year, and his image is often seen on calendars.

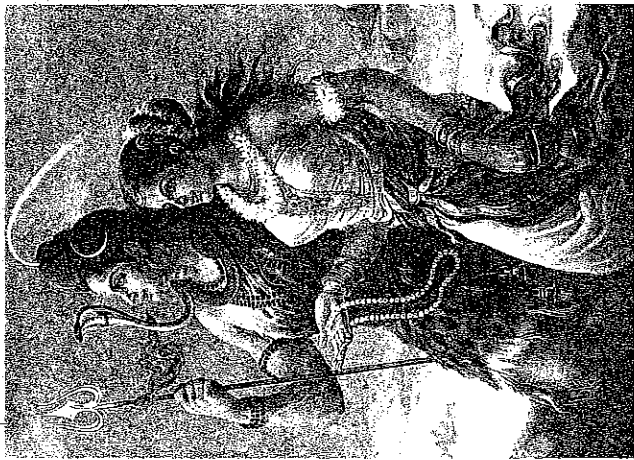


GANESH CHATURTHI FESTIVAL

Ganesha's birth is celebrated by the Ganesh Chaturthi festival on the fourth day (*chaturthi*) of the lunar month Bhadrapada (August-September). In the state of Maharashtra, and in its capital, Bombay, elaborate clay models of Ganesha are paraded through the streets. The festival has assumed massive proportions and is attended by thousands of local inhabitants.



Shiva and Parvati



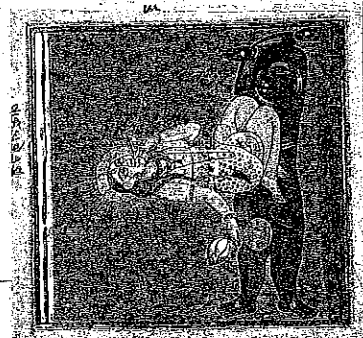
Shiva is both destroyer and creator, god of asceticism and of procreation. He is the Lord of Yoga, smeared with the ashes of renunciation, and the cremation ground, yet he is also the source of the Ganges, the river that gives life. In spite of the multiplicity of forms in which he appears, Shiva is mostly worshipped through the *linga* (see pp.66-7), the symbolic, semi-abstract representation of the phallus.

Whereas many Hindu deities stand for specific attributes of divinity (*brahman*), Shiva remains a paradox — he is definable only by the oppositions that he embodies. The Pashupata sect, who worshipped him in the early centuries AD, deliberately performed seemingly nonsensical or indecent actions, such as going naked, dwelling in cremation grounds, or substituting faeces for Shiva and Parvati are frequently represented in popular art, as in this 20th-century poster.

DAKSHA'S SACRIFICE

One famous Shaivite legend concerns Shiva's love for Sati, the daughter of Daksha. Shiva and Sati tricked Daksha into consenting to their marriage. But Daksha was disgusted by the ash-smeared body and matted hair of the ascetic god, and when he held a feast and fire sacrifice, he did not invite Sati and Shiva to attend. When Sati learned of her father's distaste for Shiva, she threw herself onto the sacrificial fire (see p.127). On hearing news of this, the enraged Shiva created Kali and Bhairava to kill Daksha

and wreck the sacrifice. He took Sati's miraculously preserved corpse from the fire and carried it for many years until it finally fell apart. Sati reincarnated herself as Parvati, "Daughter of the Himalayas", and resolved to join Shiva again, who was still lost in mourning. Kama, the Lord of Desire, fired an arrow of love at the god's heart, but Shiva, who had been meditating, was furious at the interruption. Opening his fearsome third eye, he burned Kama to ashes, but later, realizing that Sati had been reborn, Shiva longed for, and finally obtained, their reunion.



Bhairava, the ferocious aspect of Shiva, is shown here astride the corpse of Daksha, Shiva's father-in-law, from an 18th-century painting.

flowers on Shiva's altars. The aim of these acts was to reveal the illusory nature of opposites, thus demonstrating the underlying unity of the god's nature. Polarity is the work of *maya* (see pp.130-31) in Shaivite thought, and oppositions such as creation and destruction, and life and death, are understood to be mutually dependent. Such dualities form the basis of what is commonly called "reality".

In recognizing Shiva as a total, all-encompassing deity, Shaivite cults began to incorporate key aspects of goddess worship into their mythology. Shiva's power (*shakti*) was increasingly represented by his consort, a form of



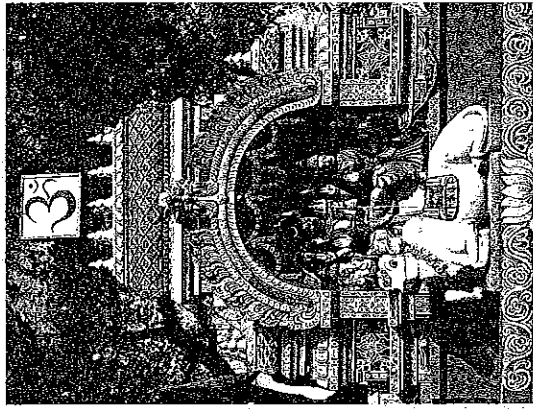
ABOVE Shaivite imagery pervades everyday life, as shown in this wall painting from Rajasthan.

RIGHT: A modern temple in Hyderabad depicting the "divine family" — Shiva, Parvati and their son Ganesha — with the reclining bull, Nandi, also considered sacred, in the foreground.

PARVATI VALLEY

Parvati Valley, near Kulu in Himachal Pradesh, is the setting of many of the myths that describe the life of Shiva and Parvati. At the foot of the valley are the hot springs at Manikaran. Legend has it that after making love with Parvati for 10,000 years, Shiva spent a further 10,000 years in meditation at

the goddess Devi (see pp.78-9). Like the mother goddess of old (see pp.20-21), Devi has both benign and horrific incarnations. She is the peaceful Sati, Uma or Parvati; her ferocious aspects manifest themselves variously as Chamunda, Kali and Durga (see pp.80-81). While Kali and Durga appear briefly to wreak destruction on Shiva's enemies, Parvati is always by his side, his perfect complement and celestial "wife". The sexual and spiritual union of Shiva and Parvati became the basis of Tantric and Shakta philosophy (see pp.110-11), and numerous legends describe the "divine family" at their home on Mount Kailasa.



Manikaran. His time there passed well, and in gratitude he made the rocks hot so that future yogis who visited the site would be able to sit there in warmth and comfort.

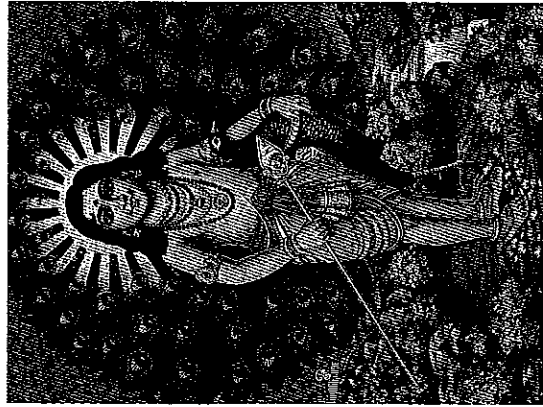
The name "Manikaran" is derived from a story in which Parvati lost a jewel (*mani*) in the river — it was later returned to her by the Lord of the Underworld in a cascade of hot water.

Southern sons of Shiva

In the southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the gods Ayyappan and Murugan, the southern sons of Shiva, are worshipped as incarnate manifestations of Shiva's *shakti* (power), in much the same way as Vaishnavites honour *avatars* such as Krishna and Rama as incarnations of Vishnu. The myths recounting the lives of Ayyappan and Murugan are much

MURUGAN

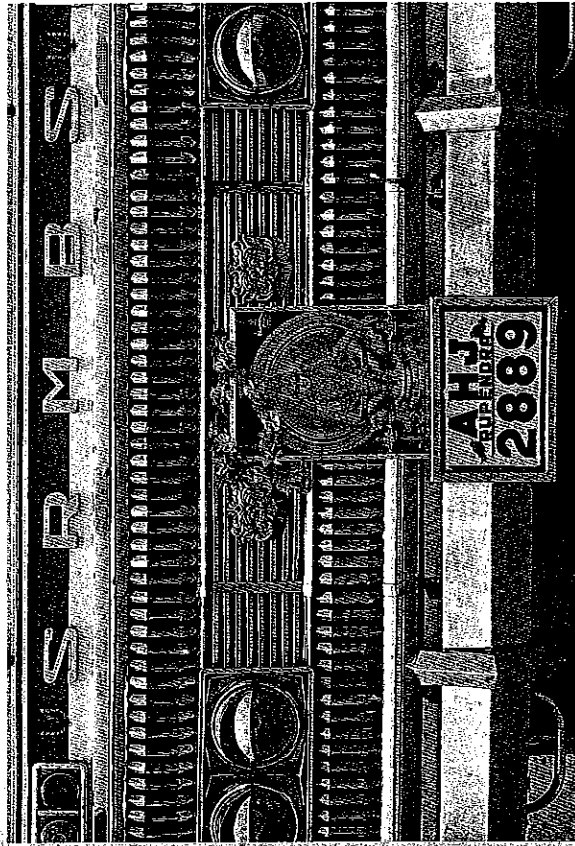
Murugan is a popular rural deity in the foothills of western Tamil Nadu. He is often identified with Skanda, Shiva's warrior-god son, and like his northern counterpart he is usually shown carrying a spear or trident. Murugan may have originated as a fertility god and his worship probably included some form of orgiastic dancing.



Murugan, accompanied by a peacock on which he rides, as shown in a modern poster.

influenced by the *bhakti* (devotional) movement (see pp.58-9), and are rooted in the local areas in which each cult is based. They are mainly worshipped as protectors of the village, and most stories relating to them tell of battles against local demons and the darkness of the forest. Both deities are represented as young and victorious; unlike the distant and transcendent Shiva, both are believed to play an active role in the lives of their devotees.

Murugan is the major deity of the ancient Tamils, and is still popular in modern Tamil Nadu as a "clan" or family god. Until this century, worship of Ayyappan was confined to Kerala, specifically to the mountain rain forests close to the Pamba river which forms the border with Tamil Nadu. In 1950, just 1,000 pilgrims travelled to Sabarimala, the jungle temple where Ayyappan is said to reside, while 400,000 made the journey in 1988. His origins are exclusively local, for he is a village god who slays the forest demons, but his devotees now also come from Madras, Bombay and Calcutta. To these pilgrims, Ayyappan is a symbol of change, development and ultimate success in the secular as well as spiritual world. Eighteen gold steps ascend from the forest to the entrance of Sabarimala temple, representing a ladder leading to moral and spiritual success. Each step stands for a different *raga* (vice or sin), and every year that a pilgrim climbs the steps another vice should be renounced. In this way the staircase comes to symbolize the devotee's own quest for spiritual release, the process of *jayikkaka* (becoming victorious) for which Ayyappan is renowned.



Pilgrims to Sabarimala decorate the buses and cars in which they travel with images of Ayyappan.

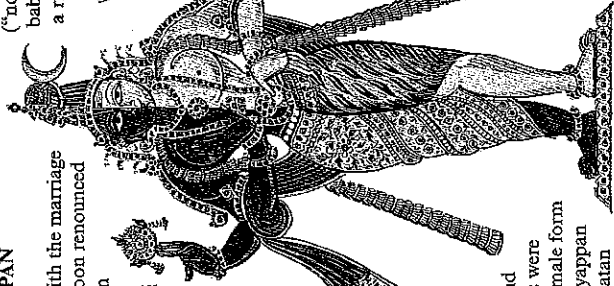
THE STORY OF AYYAPPAN

Ayyappan's story begins with the marriage of Datta and Lila. Datta soon renounced Lila, cursing her to be born as Mahishi, a buffalo-headed demoness. Mahishi practised severe austerities and was granted supernatural powers by the gods, who ruled that she could only be freed of the curse by a child born of two males, who had lived for twelve years as a mortal. With her new powers Mahishi defeated the gods and ruled the universe.

Ayyappan was born from the union of Shiva and Vishnu. Since both parents were male, Vishnu assumed a female form to conceive. As a result Ayyappan became known as A-yoni-jatan

("not from female genitals born"). The baby Ayyappan was found abandoned on a river bank by a king. He lived for twelve years as heir to the throne until the queen had a child of her own and grew jealous of the founding. Feigning illness, she sent Ayyappan to the forest for some leopard's milk, hoping he would be killed by beasts. Ayyappan met Mahishi in the forest and slew her, freeing Lila. He then rode to the palace on a tiger, accompanied by leopards - symbols of his victory over the dark forces of the forest.

This modern print shows the deity Hari-Hara, a combination of Vishnu (Hari, shown here in dark blue) and Shiva (Hara, recognizable by his tiger skin and crescent moon).



Devi

The oldest and most frequently manifested deity of the Hindu pantheon is Devi, the Goddess. Like the ancient pre-Aryan mother goddess (see pp.20-21), Devi appears as both the broad-hipped provider and as the fierce destroyer of mortal life. She is worshipped in India's villages in myriad forms, such as Bhū, the ancient-earth goddess, Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas (see pp.74-5), the avengers Kali and Durga (see pp.80-81), and as the consort of numerous male gods. She is often called Mother. — *Mata* or *Matangi* in northern India, and *Annaman* in the jungles of the south — and is usually represented as the *yoni*, the female principle surrounding the male *linga* (see pp.66-7).

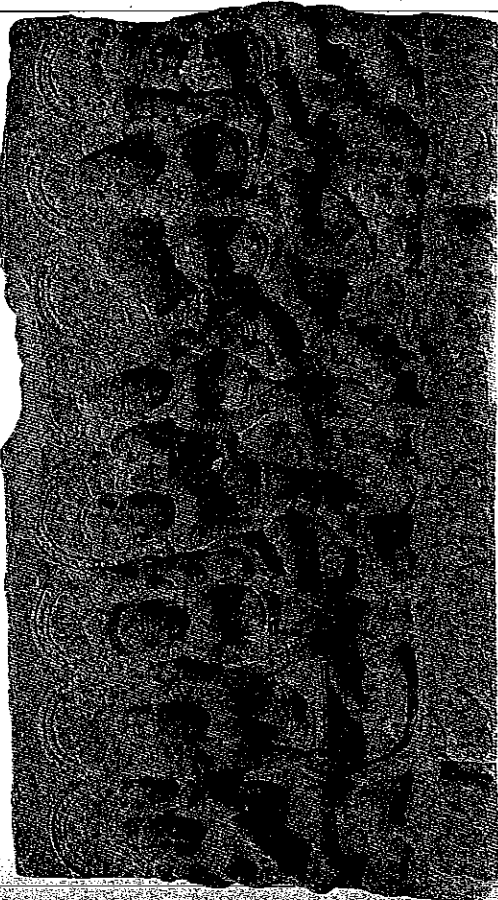
Like the old mother goddess, Devi is primarily associated with fertility and the earth. India itself is seen as the body of Devi, whose forms can be found in the features of the landscape. Cities such as Calcutta (*Kali Ghat*) draw their

names from forms of Devi, and goddesses are often named after natural features, such as Rama's consort, Sita (see p.53), whose name means furrow. Where the male deities of the Hindu pantheon are otherworldly, the *avatars* of the goddess are active and immanent. Devi is not distant from the *maya* (illusion) of worldly life (see pp.130-31), but is known as *Mahamaya* (Great Illusion). Since the land itself is her body, she may be both known and approached by her devotees.

The male deities Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu (the *trimurti*) embody ideals toward which their devotees can only strive. Brahma is little more than a transcendent principle; Vishnu represents a moral ideal of inhuman purity; Shiva's ascetic severity is unattainable by mortals. The Goddess, on the other hand, is defined by her action in this world. While Shiva meditates high in his Himalayan retreat, the Goddess in her incarnation as Kali fights on the

battlefield, slaying the demons of ignorance with a vigour quite unlike Krishna's calm detachment (see pp.60-61). The Goddess's power to act in the human world was elaborated by theologians, particularly in the group of texts called the *Tantras* (see

pp.110-11). They recognized Devi as the holder and centre of divine power (*shakti*). The Goddess's horrific forms, such as Kali and Durga, were worshipped through Tantric rituals as supreme powers in themselves, unfettered by transcendent male divinities.

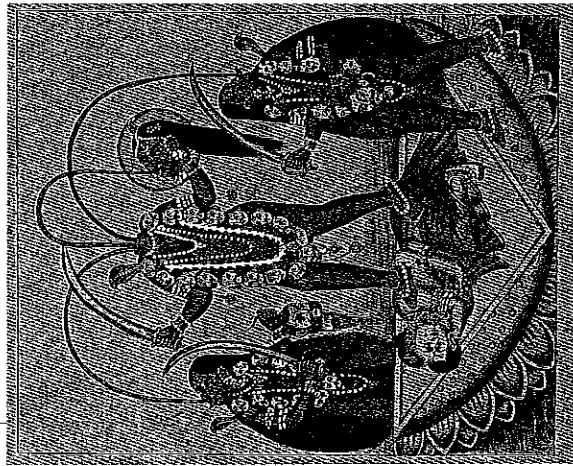


The Saptamatikas, or Seven Mothers, embodying the energies of all the major gods of Hinduism, usually appear together with Kali, as in this 9th-century relief from central India.

CHINNAMASTA

Chinnamasta, the Goddess of Great Wisdom, has been a popular Hindu deity since the 12th century. She is usually depicted standing on the back of Rati, who is copulating in the superior position with her husband Kama, the Lord of Desire. The energy generated by this sexual intercourse feeds Chinnamasta, who in turn decapitates herself to nourish her devotees with her own blood, thus uniting sex and death — the opposite but interconnected principles which govern the universe.

In this mid-19th-century Tantric image, the goddess Chinnamasta stands on the yoni triangle representing the feminine cosmic principle. Her blood feeds two yoginis. Tantric symbols of the left and right sides of the body.



LAKSHMI

Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and plenty. She is the consort of Vishnu (see pp.50-51). Whereas Vishnu stands for the transcendent moral good and order (*dharma*) of the universe, Lakshmi represents all the good things in worldly life. She brings vitally needed rains (symbolized by her attendant elephants) and gold coins pour from her outstretched hand. She is worshipped throughout India as the goddess of good luck and good fortune.

GANGA

As well as being associated with the land, Devi is linked with India's great rivers, many of which are worshipped as divine forces in themselves. The river Ganges, for example, is characterized in the Hindu pantheon as Ganga, the goddess who resides in the infinite folds of Shiva's matted hair. Rural goddesses are often worshipped by throwing garlands of flowers into rivers just as temple icons are worshipped by placing flowers around their heads.



A dry-mud image of Devi being prepared for worship in Calcutta.

Durga and Kali

Durga is a manifestation of Devi (see pp.78-9) and is widely worshipped as the terrible aspect of the benign goddess Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas (see pp.74-5). But whereas Parvati acts only as Shiva's consort, Durga exists in her own right, slaying the demons of ignorance with the power (*shakti*) of her own ferocity.

Since the first centuries AD, Durga has been revered throughout India for slaying the buffalo-demon Mahishasura. The story, drawn from the *Durga Charitra* ("Exploits of the Great Goddess Durga"), is one of the most famous of Hindu



The head of the goddess Durga in a Durga Puja procession.

DURGA PUJA

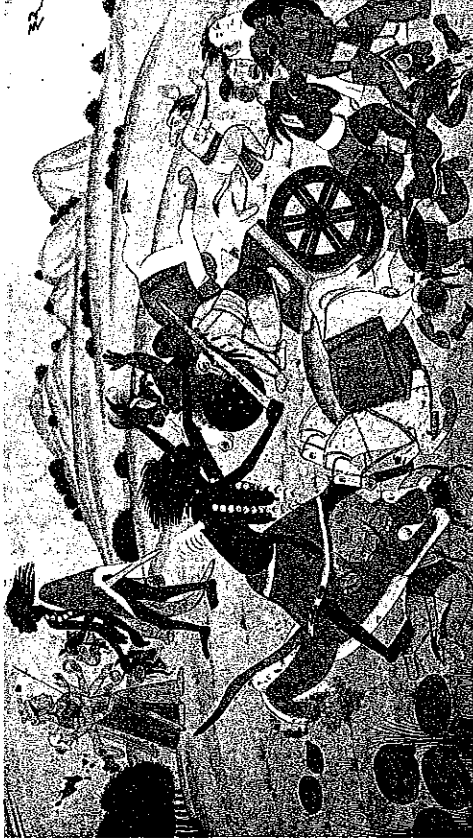
The Durga Puja is the most popular and elaborate religious festival celebrated in Bengal. Devotees of Durga undergo a nine-day fast. Family members are encouraged to return to their ancestral homes. On the last day of the festival huge images of

myths. The great demon Mahishasura practised such severe austerities that the gods were forced to grant him near-infinite power. He took the form of a buffalo and railed against the gates of the heavens. The furious gods, overwhelmed by the demon's tremendous might and the *arita* (disorder) ensuing from it, created Durga, combining their power in a single deity.

The mighty goddess annihilated hordes of demon armies and finally slew Mahishasura by placing her foot upon his neck and decapitating him.

Durga are carried through the streets and taken to a river where they are ceremoniously immersed. At the end of the Puja, married daughters must return to the houses of their husbands, evoking the myth of the benign goddess Parvati returning to Mount Kailasa, the abode of Shiva.

Durga riding the lion that battles with the buffalo-demon Mahishasura is a recurring theme in Indian art. The goddess is frequently shown armed with the divine weapons of the gods, and her composure is in striking contrast to the violent posture of Mahishasura. In this 18th-century miniature, the demon takes human form, except for his fierce, animal-like head. Here, uncharacteristically, he is shown riding a horse and brandishing a European gun.



This 17th-century miniature painting from northern India depicts Kali slaying demons.

Kali, "the black one", is the destroyer, the fearsome goddess with the long red tongue. Her enemies are devoured by her cavernous mouth; her eyes are bloodshot with the desire for battle and carnage, and a garland of skulls hangs around her neck.

Kali's image is the most terrifying of all Hindu deities, yet she is adored as much as feared by her devotees. The poets and scholars of 18th- and 19th-

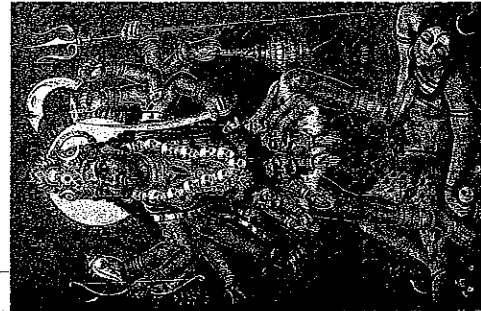
century India, such as Ramprasad Sen and Ramakrishna, worshipped her as "the holy mother", and the earlier Tantric cults saw in her the supreme power of godhead.

Like Shiva, Kali is an outsider, feared and appeased by the other gods. Both Kali and Shiva live in cremation grounds, for they are outcasts. Unlike Shiva, lost in meditation, Kali rambles on the battlefields of worldly life.

KALI BESTRIDING SHIVA

One of the most popular images of Kali depicts her bestriding the sleeping, or "corpse", form of the god Shiva. Tantric images represent her in the act of sexual intercourse, squating upon Shiva's prostrate body. Such images are symbolic of the union of Shiva and Shakti, the male and female principles of godhead.

The fearsome goddess Kali is depicted (left) in a popular print bestriding Shiva's body, and (right) in a far less frightening pose in an 11th-century bronze statue.



THE THUGS

The Thugs (*Shitgas*, or cheats) were organized bands of assassins, who terrorized travellers across India for more than 300 years. A Thug would befriend a single traveller and then strangle him, claiming to do so in Kali's name. They were suppressed under British rule during the 1830s, and today only their name survives.

