

# Gods and Goddesses of Vedic Culture

## A Quick Guide to the Primary Divinities of Sanatana-Dharma

by Stephen Knapp

One of the most confusing topics to people who are new or unfamiliar with the Vedic tradition is the number of Gods there seems to be within it. This is not really so difficult to understand. So here is a quick guide with brief descriptions that may help to bring some clarity to how they fit into the scheme of things. More elaborate explanations are available in my book "The Heart of Hinduism" and elsewhere on my website.

One point to understand is that some sages think the Absolute is an impersonal force, the great effulgent Brahman, and that all the Gods are but different manifestations of that Brahman. In this case, all the Vedic Gods are equal in that they are but various aspects of the same Brahman. Other sages see that the Absolute is indeed a personal but unfathomable Supreme Being who reigns above all, the source of all, and from whom everything else manifests. (For further insights into this you can read the article [\*God is Both Personal \(Bhagavan\) and Impersonal \(Brahman\)\*](#) on this website.)

In the latter case, all the Vedic Gods have specific positions and purposes in the administration and maintenance of the material creation, in which case they hold various powers from the Supreme and fulfill certain functions on behalf of the Supreme Being, similar to the way assorted executives in a company carry out the orders of the Chief Executive Officer. Thus, these demigods are worshiped for attaining particular results or facilities while we live and progress in this life. Thus, one can worship the Supreme Being, knowing full well that everything and all blessings ultimately come from Him, as well as respect the other demigods for assistance in living in this world. Therefore, here are the descriptions of the purposes and functions of the primary Divinities of the Dharmic tradition.

The descriptions are short excerpts from articles on this website, and from the book by Stephen Knapp called [\*The Heart of Hinduism\*](#), which has a full elaboration on the pantheon of Divinities of the Vedic tradition.

## Lord Sri Krishna



Lord Krishna is one of the most revered and honored of all the Dharmic Gods. As it is explained and concluded in a variety of Vedic texts, Lord Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead. In other words, as it is said in Sanskrit, *krsnas tu bhagavan svayam* (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 1.3.28) Krishna is the source of all other incarnations and forms of God. He is the ultimate and end of all Truth and philosophical enquiry, the goal or end result of Vedanta. He is the all-attractive personality and source of all pleasure for which we are always hankering. He is the origin from which everything else manifests. He is the unlimited source of all power, wealth, fame, beauty, wisdom, and renunciation. Thus, no one is greater than Him. Since Krishna is the source of all living beings, He is also considered the Supreme Father and source of all worlds. He is shown with a blue or blackish complexion. This represents absolute, pure consciousness, which also is unconditional love. Krishna is the embodiment of love. He is also *sat-chit-ananda vigraha*, which means the form of eternal knowledge and bliss. Thus, Krishna devotees make Him, along with His consort Srimati Radharani, their life and soul. [Much more can be learned about Lord Krishna in the ebook "[Sri Krishna](#)" on this website.

## Lord Sri Vishnu



Lord Vishnu is the all-pervasive Lord who expands into everything. He is the maintainer of the universe and the complete cosmic creation. He is called Vishnu because He overcomes all. He represents *sattva-guna*, or the mode of goodness by which everything is sustained. He is also called Narayana, which means the shelter, resting place, or ultimate goal of all living entities. It also means the one whose abode is the causal waters (Karana Ocean), and one who lives in the hearts of all living beings. It is this *sattva* nature which gives the living beings the tendency to grow toward a higher truth, the light, a more cohesive and intense reality. In this sense, Lord Vishnu is also called Hari, or one who removes the darkness of illusion. This illusion ultimately means the idea that the living beings live separate from, or without connection to the Lord. Though many consider Vishnu the direct source of all avatars of the Lord who appear in this world, in such texts as *Bhagavad-gita*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavata Purana*, *Vishnu Purana* and others, He is considered an expansion from Lord Krishna who is the actual

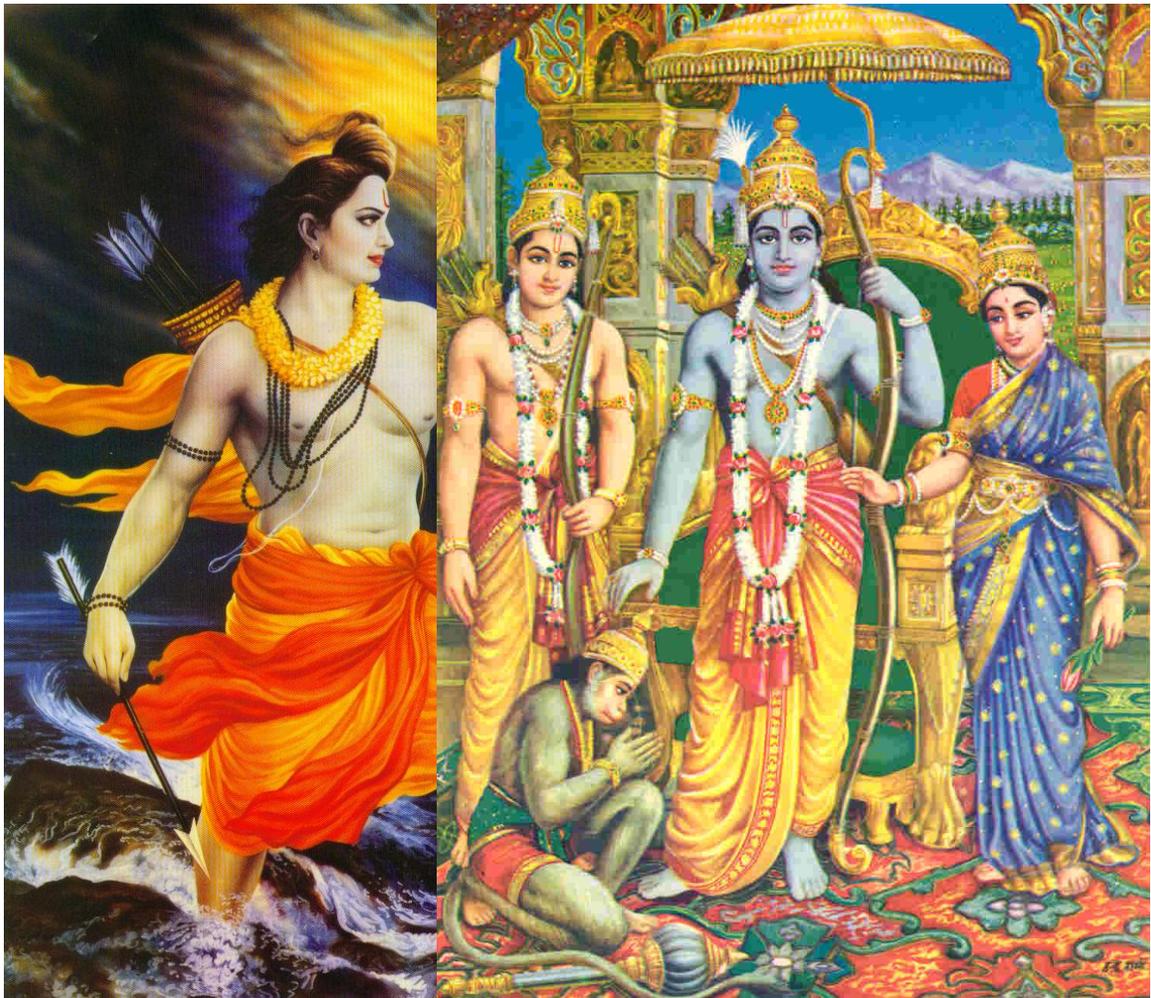
source of all avatars, and the doorway through whom all of the Lord's avatars appear in this material world. More can be understood about Him in the article "[Lord Vishnu](#)" on this website. You can also read about the various avatars of the Lord in our article [The Avatars of God](#).

## Lord Satyanarayan



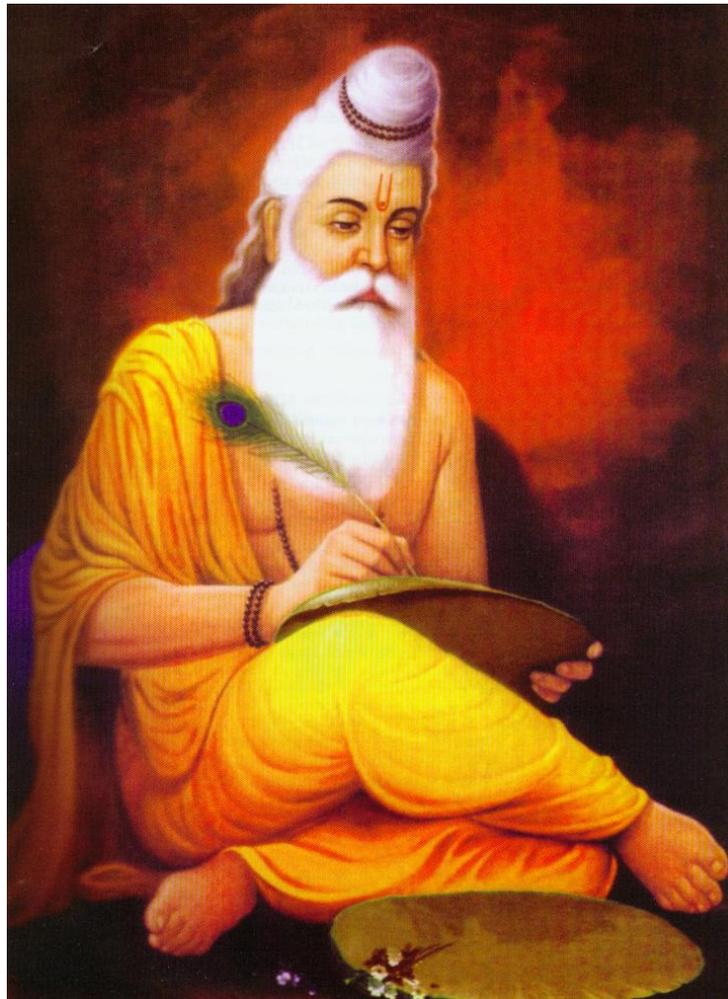
Lord Satyanarayana is Lord Vishnu Himself as the avatara of Satya (truth). He is worshiped especially by householders and friends in numerous temples, particularly on the full moon night of the month, and during the holy day known as Lakshmi puja, the worship of Goddess Lakshmi, Lord Vishnu's divine consort.

## Lord Rama



Lord Rama, also known as Ramachandra, is one of the most popular of the Vedic Gods, and the central figure of the classic *Ramayana*. He is the 7th avatara and also known as Raghava, Rajarama, Raghupati, etc. The *Ramayana* has played a most significant part of the Vedic culture, and relates the story of Lord Rama and His wife Sita. You can read a shortened version of this in the article on our website, called [\*The Ramayana Summarized\*](#).

## Srila Vyasadeva



Srila Vyasadeva is an example of one of the expansions of the Lord, an avatara, who appeared as the great sage, also known as VedaVyasa, who divided the four *Vedas* into its many parts and divisions for the benefit of the

people so they could study and understand it. You can read more about Him in the article [Srila Vyasadeva](#) on this website.

## Lord Brahma



Lord Brahma is the secondary engineer of the universe. He appeared from the expansion of Lord Vishnu who first appeared within this universe, known as Karanakashayi Vishnu, Vishnu who rests on the Karana Ocean within this universe. Brahma is also known as Svyambhu, or the self-manifested one, He has four heads which represent the four *Vedas*, the four Yugas of time, and the four directions. He is also part of the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, who are the Gods of creation, maintenance and destruction.

# Lord Shiva



We can find characteristics of Lord Shiva described in numerous texts. The *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (4.2.2), for example, states that Lord Shiva is the spiritual master of the entire world. He is a peaceful personality, free from enmity, always satisfied in himself. He is the greatest among all the demigods. He is the spiritual master of the world by showing how to worship the Supreme. He is considered the best of all devotees. Therefore, he has his own spiritual line or *sampradaya* called the Rudra-sampradaya that comes directly from him. These days it is also found in the Vishnusvami-sampradaya, or the Vallabha-sampradaya.

Shiva is also described as the most powerful, second only to Lord Vishnu. (*Srimad-Bhagavatam* 4.24.22-28) In this way, he is not the Supreme, but is almost as powerful. Although he has nothing to attain in this material world, he is always engaged for the benefit of everyone in this universe, and is accompanied by his material and dangerous energies like goddess Kali and goddess Durga. Sometimes we see pictures of a fierce form of Kali standing with one foot on the body of Shiva. This is because Shiva sometimes has to lie down in front of her to

pacify her from killing all the demoniac people in the world. In this way, Shiva controls the material energy. Lord Shiva is also in control of the destructive energy, *tamo-guna*, the mode of darkness, and is assisted by Kali and Durga in this purpose.

It is also said that Shiva's drum represents *srishti*, the creation; the *abhaya* hand (giving blessings) represents *sthiti*, or preservation; his foot that presses down symbolizes *tirobhava*, or the veiling effect; and the uplifted foot means blessings (*anugraha*), especially toward seeing through the veil of illusion caused by ego. When he is shown with an axe, it represents *samhara*, destruction. Shiva worshipers are Shaivites. Much more can be learned about Lord Shiva in our ebook on this website called, [Shiva and Durga: Their Real Identity](#).

## Goddess Lakshmi



Goddess Lakshmi is the consort and *shakti*, or potency, of Lord Vishnu. Lakshmi, or Sri when she is especially known as the goddess of beauty (though sometimes considered to be separate entities), is the Goddess of fortune, wealth, power, and loveliness. Wealth means not only money, but also the higher values and qualities of life. The power of the mind and intellect is also a must if one wants to be truly wealthy, which includes spiritual wealth. These are prerequisites to attaining spiritual knowledge. This is why Lakshmi is worshiped in the second set of three days during the Navaratri festival before the worship of Sarasvati.

As the spouse of Lord Vishnu, she appears whenever He does in each of His appearances, such as Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, or Krishna. In each of these appearances, she appeared as Padma or Kamala, Dharani, Sita, and Rukmini respectively. They are inseparable.

Lakshmi is also known in Her other eight forms as Veera, Adhi, Gaja, Vijaya, Dhana, Aiswarya, Santhan, and Dhanya. The Goddess known as MahaLakshmi is actually an aspect of Durga and not Lakshmi. More can be learned about Lakshmidēvi in our article [\*Lakshmi, The Goddess of Fortune\*](#).

## **Goddess Sarasvati**



The literal meaning of the name Sarasvati is the one who gives the essential knowledge (*Sara*) of our own Self (*Sva*). The goddess Sarasvati is also considered the Goddess of Learning, or of education, intelligence, crafts, arts, and skills. As she is the consort of Brahma, who is considered the source of all knowledge, Sarasvati is knowledge itself. Thus, many students or even scholars may worship her for her blessings. She is, therefore, depicted as white in complexion, and quite beautiful and graceful. She is also called Savitri (daughter of the Sun), Brahmi (wife of Brahma), Sharada (giver of essence), Vagishvari (mistress of speech), Mahavidya (knowledge supreme), and Vach. You can learn more about Goddess Sarasvati in our article [\*Sarasvati, The Goddess of Learning.\*](#)

## **Goddess Durga**



Worship of the Goddess goes back at least 4000 years in India, and further back to the Vedic times. Durga is the Goddess of the universe, and Parvati, the wife of Lord Shiva, is a form of Durga. She is the power of knowledge, wisdom and memory. She has up to 64 different forms, with different names for each form. Each form represents a different pastime, power, or aspect of the Goddess. Some of the names of these forms of Durga are Amba or Ambika, Bhadra, Bhadrakali, Aryadurga, Vedagarbha, Kshemakshemakari, Naikabahu, Bhagavati, Katyayani, Meenakshi, Rajarajeshvari, Kali, Devi, and others, such as Sati, which means chastity. Thus, these are all different aspects of the same goddess. In her gentle aspects she is worshiped as Kanya, Kamakshi, or Mukamba. Uma (Parvati) is the maiden name for the consort of Lord Shiva. She represents matter (*prakriti*). Shiva is the god of destruction, which has no meaning without objects to destroy. Thus, he is paired with Uma.

Durga is often pictured as a beautiful woman in red cloth. She has either four, eight, ten, eighteen or twenty hands and three eyes. Items in her hands can include a conch, disc, trident, bow, arrow, sword, dagger, shield, rosary, wine cup, and bell, all of which represent her various powers. She may also be standing on a lotus or riding a lion. The lion represents power, but also the

animal tendency of greed for food and other sensual objects. Her riding on the lion represents that she keeps all such tendencies under complete control. You can learn more about Durga and Parvati in the ebook [\*Shiva and Durga: Their Real Identity.\*](#)

## Goddess Parvati



Parvati is also the wife of Lord Shiva, known as the daughter of Himavan and Mena. Durga is a different aspect of Parvati. She is also known as Lord Vishnu's sister. She was Dakshayani in her first incarnation as the daughter of the great sage Daksha and Prasuti. She is also called Haimavati, Girija, Rudrani (connected with Shiva as Rudra), Aparna, Sharvani, Uma, Mridani, and Gauri.

## Lord Ganesh



Ganesh is known as the Lord of thresholds or entrances into new dimensions. So it is not unusual, especially in India, that as we enter a new space or house we may see an image of Ganesh above the door or nearby to give blessings to those who enter. Thus, he is also the guardian of the doorways. This is the case in many Vedic temples. As we enter the temple, we first see a deity of Ganesh to whom we pray for blessings and the removal of obstacles in our devotion or the rituals that we do inside the temple.

Ganesh is also considered the Lord of astrology. He is said to know the language of the stars and the destinies of every living being. Thus, astrologers also petition Ganesh to pen such knowledge to them.

Ganesh is also said to be the writer of the scriptures. (*Mahabharata* 1.1.77) He accepted the position of being Vyasadeva's scribe and wrote the *Mahabharata* and *Srimad-Bhagavatam* as it was dictated by Srila Vyasadeva, the compiler of the major portions of the Vedic texts. You can see the cave where this is said to have happened at Mana, near the holy place of Badrinatha (Badarikashrama). For this reason the ancient *Brahmana* texts also describe him as the god of learning.

His other names include Ganesh (related to the word *gana*), Vinayaka (a name familiar in South India, meaning great leader), Vighneshvara (the remover of obstacles), Gajanana (elephant-faced), Gajadhira (lord of elephants), and Jyeshtha-raja (King of the elders).

Ganesh is said to have two wives or Shaktis named Siddhi (success) and Riddhi (prosperity). Thus, if anyone pleases Lord Ganesh with nice prayers or worship, the person also attains the company or blessings of the wives of Lord Ganesh. However, if used improperly, success and prosperity can be distractions on the path toward the goal of spiritual wisdom.

The most prominent characteristic of Lord Ganesh is that he has the head of an elephant. How Lord Ganesh got an elephant's head is related in several places in the Vedic texts. There may be a few different versions, but the general way in which it is accepted relates as follows: Once when Lord Shiva's wife, Parvati, was going to bathe in the forest, she wanted someone to guard the area. Some references say she was going to bathe in her house. She then rubbed her skin so she was able to gather the substance from which she could form and cause the birth of a son. When he came to life, she ordered him to let no one into the area while she was bathing. However, Lord Shiva came after a long absence and wanted in, but was blocked by Ganesh. Lord Shiva did not recognize the boy as his son, nor did Ganesh realize Shiva was his father, and they began to fight. Ganesh lost the battle with his head being cut off. When Parvati entered the scene and saw what had happened, she was so upset that Shiva, after understanding the situation, devised the means to revive his son. He went to find the nearest living entity he saw, which happened to be an elephant. He took the head and attached it to his son's body, after which he was revived. Thus, Ganesh has the head of an elephant. (Much more information is supplied in the book *The Heart of Hinduism*.)

## **Lord Subrahmaniya (Murugan)**



Lord Murugan is usually portrayed sitting on his carrier, which is a peacock called Paravani, with one head and two arms, or sometimes as Subramaniya with six heads and twelve arms. Dressed in red, he also holds his brilliant lance, which represents wisdom and intelligence, and destroys the darkness of ignorance, symbolized by the demons he kills. His additional hands hold a bow, arrows, a sword, thunderbolt, and ax, all which indicate his powers. His emblem is the fowl or rooster and his fiery banner flames high above his chariot. He is another son of Shiva and Parvati, and, thus, the brother of Ganesh.

The esoteric meaning behind the image of Murugan is that he represents the complete yogic control of preserving the semen. If this control is not attained, then the mind is always stifled by sensual desires, which means that the child, or the power of youth in the form of Kumara, is never born, and thus the demons take control over the gods. This signifies that only by allowing the seed to rise up through the yogic *sushumna* channel into the *vani-mukha* or fire center in the sixth *chakra*, can the yogi become master of his tendencies and impulses. (There is also an old Egyptian saying that only by preserving one's semen can one communicate with the gods.) Only then can Skanda, or the inner strength or power, be born. Such a master can use his sexual powers for mental clarity, discernment, stamina, and spiritual progress. Lasting youth is also connected with

the practice of preserving one's seed, which is represented by Murugan's peacock, which is his carrier.

Subrahmaniya is also known as Skanda, Guha, Saktidhara, Tarakari, Kumara, Sanatkumara, Gangeya, Shanmukha, Shivakumara, and Karttikeya. His two consorts or Shaktis are Valli (power of Will) and Devasena. (Much more information is supplied in the book [\*The Heart of Hinduism.\*](#))

## Lord Buddha



Buddha is considered the 9th avatara of Vishnu. His name means the enlightened one. He was Prince Siddhartha of the Shakya clan, born in Lumbini, now in Nepal. He is also known as Shakyamuni Buddha, Gautama, Buddha and Tathgata. You can read more about him in the article [\*Buddhism and Its Vedic Connections.\*](#)

## Hanuman



Hanuman is not necessarily one of the Vedic gods, but is honored like one for having been the most dedicated devotee of Lord Rama. He is the son of the wind god, Vayu, and, thus, has superhuman powers which he uses for good and in his service to Lord Rama and Sita. He is also known as Maruti and Anjaneya after his mother, Anjana. Devotees pray to Hanuman for the blessings of increased devotion to the Lord. You can read more about him in [\*The Ramayana Summarized\*](#).

## Goddess Gayatri



Gayatri is the goddess that is the personification of the sacred Gayatri mantra, which is chanted three times a day. She shares that with the goddesses Savitri and Sarasvati. Gayatri has four or five faces, and four or ten arms and rides a swan. She presides over the morning chanting of the prayer, and also over the *Rig-veda* and the sacred fires called the Garhapatya. These were the sacred fires that the three *varnas* known as the brahmanas, kshatriyas, and vaishyas were meant to keep in their homes for the performance of sacred rituals. Then Goddess Savitri presides over the noon chanting of the prayer. She has four faces with twelve eyes, four arms, and has a bull for a carrier. She also rules over the *Yajur-veda* and the Dakshina fire, while Sarasvati rules over the evening rendition of the prayer and the *Sama-veda*.

Gayatri is also known as Veda-Mata, or the mother of all the *Vedas*. She is also another consort of Lord Brahma, being given to him in the form of the mantra by Lord Vishnu to attain the wisdom he needed to understand how to begin his portion of the creation of the universe.

## Other Divinities

**The Adityas** are the personifications or the embodiment of the universal laws. They regulate the behavior of humans among themselves in conjunction with the natural forces. The Adityas are the twelve sons of Aditi, wife of Kashyapa. Their dynasty is described in the *Bhagavata Purana*, which includes descendants that were great personalities and additional minor demigods.

There are twelve Adityas listed in the later Vedic literature, such as the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, while the *Rig-veda* lists six, and eight are listed in other *Brahmanas*. The names are: Amsha (one who is munificent), Aryaman (one who eliminates foes), Bhaga (one who bestows), Daksha (one who is skilled in ritual and magic), Mitra (friend), Pushan (one who nurtures), Savitri (one who activates), Shakra (the forceful), Tvashtri (one who designs), Varuna (he who surrounds or restrains), Vishnu (the omniscient maintainer) and Vivasvat (or Vivsvan, the brilliant, or the sun, Surya). In the same order, these also refer to the universal principles known as: the share given by the gods, chivalry and honor, that which is inherited, skill in ritual, solidarity in friendship, prosperity, the potency in language, courage, skill in crafts, laws of providence as directed by the gods, universal law, and morality and social order.

The name Aditya also refers to the sun. And the Adityas together are considered the eternal gods of light, or the beings that manifest luminous life throughout the universe. They are also connected to the aspects of the sun divided into the annual twelve months, or the twelve spokes of the wheel of time.

**Agni** is the fire-god, referred in the *Rig-veda*. He is the god who accepts the offerings in the ancient fire *yajnas*, or rituals, and carries them to the appropriate gods. His two consorts, Svaha and Svadha, accompany him at his sides. The ram is his carrier, while smoke is his flag. At times he is viewed riding a chariot, in which case it is drawn by red horses, and the seven winds are the wheels. He is also called other names according to his qualities, such as: Jvalana (burning), Pavaka (purifier), Vibhavasu (abundant in light), Chitrabhanu (multicolored), Bhuritejas (resplendent), Shikhin (flaming), Plavanga (flickering), and others.

**Indra** is known as the King of Heaven, and thus the king of the celestial gods. Along with Agni, he is the main deity of the *Rig-veda* and is described in many exploits. Indra is considered the controller of rain and lightning, and is also worshiped when there is a need for such. Indra is the power of the thunderbolt, and is a friend to Vayu, the wind god. They work together. Also, it is Agni, Indra and Surya who represent the three forms of fire in its earthly state, its electrical charge, and the sun globe.

**Varuna** is an ancient Vedic deity. He is associated with the rivers and ocean, as well as the clouds and water in general. He is the lord of the oceans and aquatics. He rules over the rivers and their spirit beings, as well as the serpent gods called the nagas. It is considered that those who drown go to him. He also can ward off any bad effects related to water.

**Vayu** is known as the wind-god and is connected with the Prana (the life airs in the body). He is also considered a lord of the sky (*antariksha*). The name

*Vayu* comes from the root, *va*, which means to blow. He is seen as riding a chariot, which roars as he travels, announcing his presence.

**Yama, or Yamaraja**, is the god of death and the spirits of the departed. The word *yama* means to arrest or restrain. He is also called Dharmaraja, or the king of Dharma, the principles of duty and law upon which the world is supported. This law is what gives balance to society. Within the hall of judgment (*kalchi*) he sits on his throne (*vicharabhu*) and gives the judgment of rewards or punishments to all who have died, and sends them to the appropriate abodes for the results of their life's actions.

**The Navagrahas** are the nine planets. They are viewed as astrological influences that can be understood and even stifled or amplified with proper rituals, amulets, yantras, gemstones, etc. They are divided into two parts, the auspicious and inauspicious. The first group consists of Ravi or Surya (the sun), Soma or Chandra (moon), Budha (Mercury), Shukra (Venus), Mangala, Kuja or Angaraka (Mars), and Brihashpati or Guru (Jupiter). The inauspicious planets are Shani (Saturn), Rahu (the ascending node of the moon), and Ketu (the descending node of the moon). Planet Earth is called Bhumi.

**Surya the sun-god**. Among all the Navagrahas, Surya is the most important. He is always placed in the center of the other planets since he is like the center of creation. He is the nearest and most easily recognized form of divinity, the visible source and cause of life, and thus accepted as a form or representation of the Supreme God. He is also accepted as the all-seeing eye of the Supreme. It is through his rays that he puts life into all beings. However, he also gives death. He perpetually creates, supports and then destroys all life. He is also called Aditya since he is a source of the world. He has many other names that relate to his abilities and character. A few are Aharpati (lord of the day), Jagatchakshus (eye of the universe), Karmasakshin (witness of actions), Graharajan (king of planets), Sahasrakirana (one with a thousand rays), Dyumani (jewel of the sky), and others.

In addition to the above information, to understand the various avatars of the Supreme Lord, read the article [\*The Avatars of God\*](#).