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### Introduction

“Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti” is a Sutra from Upanishads meaning, “That which exists is ONE, sages call it by various names.” This is the reason why Hindus are tolerant and accept diversity. Many young Hindus and Indians get confused with the diverse concepts of different Gods in Hinduism. This diversity can be confusing when confronted by other faiths who are equally confused with the diversity of Hinduism/Sanathana Dharma. This article is an attempt to explain the vast riches of Sanathana Dharma and help Hindus not get converted to other faiths out of confusion with the diversity of Hinduism/Sanathana Dharma. Unfortunately an average Hindu doesn't have an answer because we are not taught Hinduism properly. We only know to go to temple, ask for wishes, take prasad and may be say a few mantras. There is no connection to the Gods or the Mantras because we understand and follow the rituals but are not taught the philosophy. We hope to address the confusion young Indians have about multiple Gods, especially to counter the mockery that non-Hindus make on multiple GODS of Hinduism. Our objective is to prepare young Hindu community to give answers to these conversion machines. Some people claim that many Hindus convert to other religions because they didn't understand Idol Worship and Concept of many Gods.

### God

The English word God is a poor translation for Hindu concepts of Supreme Being/Ultimate Reality. In English, the word God refers to an Abrahamic God who is the creator and is separate from HIS creation.

Hinduism has many additional concepts which get lumped together into English translation as one word, God. Hinduism has

- Brahman
- Ishvar
- Avatar
- Deities
- Murti

each has a distinct and different meaning and many of them can be in *manifest* or in *un-manifest* form. But unfortunately, due to poverty of the English language or a lack of appreciation by language experts, all of these spiritual concepts get translated into *God* thus causing confusion. In western terminology, most often, Hindu Gods are also referred to as **Deities**.

### 33 Million Hindus Gods



A 10th century triad - Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma - from Bihar. [Wikipedia]

There is, a popular perception stating that there are 33 million deities (Gods?) in Hinduism.<sup>[116]</sup> No one has a list of all the goddesses and gods, but scholars state all deities are typically viewed in Hinduism as “emanations or manifestation of genderless principle called Brahman, representing the many facets of Ultimate Reality”.<sup>[115][116][117]</sup> This concept of Brahman is not the same as the monotheistic God of Abrahamic religions. In those religions God is considered, separate from humans as “creator of the world, above and independent of human existence”. Hinduism accommodates that concept of God as duality as well as a concept of God, the universe, human beings and all else is essentially one thing and everything is connected oneness, the same god is in every human being as Atman, the eternal Self.<sup>[117][118]</sup> It is quite likely that when the world’s population was estimated to be only 33 million, each atman being one with Brahman, led to the popular belief of 33 million Gods.

For many young Hindus and Indians who are confused with the diverse concepts of Hinduism, are

advised to seek through choosing one form that they connect most with. Then Surrender, be open and have faith, Seeking will come and path will be shown through perseverance. Hindus are implored to invest more time in understanding the vast rich Sanathana Dharma and not get converted to other faiths because they are confused with the diversity of Hinduism/Sanathana Dharma.

### **Sagun/Nirguna**

The concept of Brahman (wrongly translated as God) can be understood as Saguna or as Nirguna. The Formless Pure Consciousness is the unmanifest energy (Nirakar/Nirguna) which can manifest into form (Saakar/ Suguna) of Brahma as the Creator, Vishnu as the Protector and Shiva as the Destroyer. In unmanifest form, this is pure consciousness, Nirguna - with no Gunas or attributes , Nirvisesha - no special characteristics, Sat-chit-ananda - Eternal truth consciousness. This unmanifest form when manifested, it has form and Suguna - attributes or qualities required for sustenance of the creation. But both the Manifest (Suguna) and UnManifest (Nirguna) forms of this cosmic energy are eternal, non-destructive and non-differential from each other.

Vedas and the Upanishads have said that there is one supreme energy named “PARABRAMHA” which is formless, infinite, all pervading, omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, genderless, eternal and unfathomable or indescribable in Human language. “God” is a Supreme cosmic energy, with infinite potentialities and attributes, which is formless but can manifest into a form when required to run and sustain creation.

In comparison, other religions express God either as a Nirguna (formless, unmanifest) or Saguna (with form, manifest) but it is only Hinduism that understands God in both unmanifest as well as manifest form. Other religions when they explain God as manifest usually insist of one form of God only which sometimes is depicted as an old White Male with a flowing beard.

### **Deities**

Deities in Hinduism are referred to as **Deva** (masculine) and **Devi** (feminine).<sup>[44][45][46]</sup> The root of these terms mean “heavenly, divine, anything of excellence”.<sup>[47]</sup> Manifest Gods in Hinduism are symbolism for spiritual concepts. For example, god Indra (a Deva) and the antigod Virocana (an Asura) question a sage for insights into the knowledge of the self.<sup>[71]</sup> Deva-Asura dichotomies in Hindu mythology may be seen as “narrative depictions of tendencies within our selves”.<sup>[71]</sup> Hindu deities in Vedic era, states Mahoney, are those artists with “powerfully inward transformative, effective and creative mental powers”.<sup>[72]</sup>

Another Hindu term that is sometimes translated as God or deity is **Ishvara**<sup>[77]</sup> The term *Ishvara* has a wide range of meanings that depend on the era and the school of Hinduism.<sup>[78][79][80]</sup> In ancient

texts of Indian philosophy, *Ishvara* means supreme soul, **Brahman** (Highest Reality).<sup>[78]</sup> In medieval era texts, *Ishvara* means God, Supreme Being, personal god, or special Self depending on the school of Hinduism.<sup>[2][80][81]</sup>

### **Avatars**

Hindu mythology has nurtured the concept of Avatar, which represents the descent of a deity on earth.<sup>[155][156]</sup> This concept is commonly translated as “incarnation”,<sup>[155]</sup> and is an “appearance” or “manifestation”.<sup>[157][158]</sup>

The concept of Avatar is most developed in Vaishnavism tradition, and associated with Vishnu, particularly with Rama and Krishna.<sup>[159][160]</sup> Vishnu takes numerous avatars in Hindu mythology. He becomes female, during the Samudra manthan, in the form of Mohini, to resolve a conflict between the Devas and Asuras. His male avatars include Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalki.<sup>[160]</sup> Various texts, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*, discuss the idea of Avatar of Vishnu appearing to restore the cosmic balance whenever the power of evil becomes excessive and causes persistent oppression in the world.<sup>[156]</sup>

In Shaktism traditions, the concept appears in its legends as the various manifestations of Devi, the Divine Mother principal in Hinduism.<sup>[161]</sup> The avatars of Devi or Parvati include Durga and Kali, who are particularly revered in eastern states of India, as well as Tantra traditions.<sup>[162][163][164]</sup> Twenty one avatars of Shiva are also described in Shaivism texts, but unlike Vaishnava traditions, Shaiva traditions have focussed directly on Shiva rather than the Avatar concept.<sup>[155]</sup>

### **Murti**

Hinduism has an ancient and extensive iconography tradition, particularly in the form of *Murti* (Sanskrit: मूर्ति, IAST: Mūrti), or *Vigraha* or *Pratima*.<sup>[22]</sup> A *Murti* is itself not the god in Hinduism, but it is an image of god and represents emotional and religious value.<sup>[124]</sup> A literal translation of *Murti* as idol is incorrect, states Jeaneane Fowler, when idol is understood as superstitious end in itself.<sup>[124]</sup> Just like the photograph of a person is not the real person, a *Murti* is an image in Hinduism but not the real thing, but in both cases the image reminds of something of emotional and real value to the viewer.<sup>[124]</sup> When a person worships a *Murti*, it is assumed to be a manifestation of the essence or spirit of the deity, the worshipper’s spiritual ideas and needs are meditated through it, yet the idea of ultimate reality or **Brahman** is not confined in it.<sup>[124]</sup>

A *Murti* is an embodiment of the divine, the Ultimate Reality or **Brahman** to some Hindus.<sup>[21]</sup> In religious context, they are found in Hindu temples or homes, where they may be treated as a beloved guest and serve as a participant of Puja rituals in Hinduism.<sup>[127]</sup> A murti is installed by priests, in Hindu temples, through the Prana Pratishtha ceremony,<sup>[128]</sup> whereby state Harold Coward and David Goa, the “divine vital energy of the cosmos is infused into the sculpture” and then the

divine is welcomed as one would welcome a friend.<sup>[129]</sup> In other occasions, it serves as the center of attention in annual festive processions and these are called *Utsava Murti*.<sup>[130]</sup>

## Scriptures

### Verses Describing God as Formless (Nirakar)

“Na tasya pratima asti”

“There is no likeness of Him.” **[Svetasvatara Upanishad 4:19, Yajurveda 32:3]**

There is no Form of Nirguna Brahma or God as Supreme Consciousness.

“His formless form is not to be seen; no one sees Him with the eye.”

### **[Svetasvatara Upanishad 4:20]**

His Formless Form can't be seen. Though He manifests Himself as Sakar Saguna Brahman, no one can see Him with present eyes or material eyes. To see His Supreme and Original Form one needs spiritual perfection. “No one can understand the transcendental nature of the name, form, quality, and pastimes of God through his materially contaminated senses. Only when one becomes spiritually saturated by transcendental service to the Lord are the transcendental name, form, quality and pastimes of the Lord revealed to him.” **(Bhakti-Rasamrta-Sindhu 1.2.234).**

God says: “You cannot see me with your present eyes. Therefore I give you divine eyes so that you can behold my mystic opulence” **(Bhagavad-Gita 11.8)**

“Shudhama papviddham”

“He is body less (Here Body means the physical structure, including the bones, flesh, and organ.

Brahman has unique transcendental formless spirit body which is infinite like space) &

pure.” **(Yajurveda 40:8)**

“He (Brahman/Paramatma) does not possess bodily form like that of an ordinary living entity. There is no difference between His body and His soul. He has a unique transcendental spiritual/spirit body which is infinite and omnipresent like space. Brahman is omnipresent soul and Soul “itself” is his spiritual body. He is absolute. All His senses are transcendental. Any of His senses can perform the action of any other sense. Therefore, no one is greater than Him or equal to Him. His potencies are multifarious, and thus His deeds are automatically performed as a natural sequence.”

### **(Shvetashvatara Upanishad 6.7-8)**

God as Nirakar Nirguna Brahman or Supreme Consciousness is body less and pure. That doesn't mean His Sakar Saguna form is impure, it is pure too.

### Verses Describing God with Form (Sakar Saguna)

“Ekam Sat Vipraha Bahula Vadanti”

“The Lord of the universe, Lives inside the universe, And without being born, Appears in many forms, And only the wise realize his real form” - **(Rig Veda Purusha Suktam 2.3)**

Although I (Supreme transcendental Brahman) am unborn, imperishable, unchangeable and God of all living entities I do incarnate (Sambhavami –cause to be born or produced) by using my Maya/Illusive energy. (Maya:- the combination of material and mental elements e.g. five elements, five internal senses, five organs of action, five external sense base also called sense objects, One vital breath, mind, intelligence ) - **(Bhagavad Gita 4:6)**

Meaning - Even though I am unborn I appear (unreal appearance different from original) to be born & embodied because of my Prakriti/Maya/Illusive energy of which I am the controller. I never get influenced by three modes of nature. My transcendental infinite/formless space like form never cease to exist when I incarnate. My birth & death in personal form are just empirical reality similar to the mirage in desert or reflection of an object in the water.

Whenever & wherever there is a decline in Dharma/righteousness & religious practice, O descendant of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion-at that time I descend (Sruja-send myself forth/Descend/take visible form) myself (aham-I/Me, atmanam-self). **(Bhagavad Gita 4:7)**

Though unborn, it appears to be born in diverse ways. **(Yajurveda 31.19)**

The Lord takes on the manifold form. (It) transformed Himself in accordance with each form; that form of His was for the sake of making Him known. (e.g.:- just like the presence of unmanifest electric energy can be recognized by lightened bulb) **(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.5.19)**

“God appears in both ways as the formless Brahman and as the personal God”. They are both dimensions of his personality. **(Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.3.1)**

He has an eternal blissful spiritual body. He is the origin of all. He has no other origin and he is the prime cause of all causes.”**(Brahma Samhita 5.1)**

There are two forms of Brahman, the material & the immaterial, the mortal and the immortal, the solid and the fluid, sat (being) and tya (that), (i.e. sat-tya, true). **(The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.3.1)**

#### **How does Manifestation happen?**

Lord Krishna in Bhagavad-Gita says, “All material nature is ever existent in the form of energy of the unmanifest. Seated in Prakriti, Purusha manifests the worlds and beings.”

Purusha is the conscious seed when impregnated into Prakriti, form is manifested.

Prakriti gives Tattvas and Gunas to the form, the variations of which represent the attributes of each manifested form.

Few Tattvas are -

1. Intelligence (Buddhi)
2. Mind (Manas)
3. Ego (Aham)
4. Five subtle senses (Tanmatras)

5. Five organs of perception (Jnanendriyas)
6. Five organs of action (Karmendriyas)
7. Five great elements (Mahabutras), namely earth, water, fire, air, and space.

Gunas are –

1. Sattva: Represents light, pleasure, preservation, selflessness, divinity.
2. Rajas: Represents light and darkness, pride, creation, self-centeredness, humanity.
3. Tamas: Represents darkness, cruelty, destruction, selfishness, and sexuality.

The gunas contribute to the movement or behavior in creation, while the tattvas contribute to the diversity.

Another important concept is Vikriti which is the modified Prakriti. It is the perceptual world, we experience through our senses, which is distorted by our perceptions, desires and expectations which is why you see so much of disagreement, varying understanding and misunderstanding, fuelled by ego causing fights, wars and what not.

### Number of Gods (Deities)

Yāska, the earliest known language scholar of India (~ 500 BC), mentions that there are three deities (*Devas*) according to the Vedas, “*Agni* (fire), whose place is on the earth; *Vayu* (wind), whose place is the air; and *Surya* (sun), whose place is in the sky”.<sup>[107]</sup> This principle of three worlds (or zones), and its multiples is found thereafter in many ancient texts. The Samhitas, which are the oldest layer of text in Vedas enumerate 33 devas,<sup>[note 3]</sup> either 11 each for the three worlds, or as 12 Adityas, 11 Rudras, 8 Vasus and 2 Ashvins in the Brahmanas layer of Vedic texts.<sup>[7][47]</sup>

The Rigveda states in hymn 1.139.11,



ॐ अश्विनो वसवो रुद्रा इन्द्रो अग्निश्चैव  
अदित्यश्चैव विष्णुश्चैव सवितुश्चैव  
अथैवैतान्त्रिंशद्विंशतिर्देवाः

ॐ अश्विनो वसवो रुद्रा इन्द्रो अग्निश्चैव  
अदित्यश्चैव विष्णुश्चैव सवितुश्चैव  
अथैवैतान्त्रिंशद्विंशतिर्देवाः <sup>[111]</sup>

*O ye eleven gods whose home is heaven, O ye eleven who make earth your dwelling,*

*Ye who with might, eleven, live in waters, accept this sacrifice, O gods, with pleasure.*

*– Translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith<sup>[112]</sup>*

*Gods who are eleven in heaven; who are eleven on earth;*

*and who are eleven dwelling with glory in mid-air; may ye be pleased with this our sacrifice.*

*– Translated by HH Wilson<sup>[113]</sup>*

*— Rigveda 1.139.11*

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