

# Hinduism's Four Denominations



Hinduism Is A Splendrous Lotus  
with Four Superb Petals

INSIGHT

# Hinduism

A Splendrous Lotus with Four Superb Petals

## Saivism

Saivite Hindus worship the Supreme God as Siva, the Compassionate One. Saivites esteem self discipline and philosophy and follow a *satguru*. They worship in the temple and practice yoga, striving to be one with Siva within.

## Shaktism

Shaktas worship the Supreme as the Divine Mother, Shakti or Devi. She has many forms. Some are gentle, some are fierce. Shaktas use chants, real magic, holy diagrams, yoga and rituals to call forth cosmic forces and awaken the great kundalini power within the spine.

## Vaishnavism

Vaishnavites worship the Supreme as Lord Vishnu and His incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama. Vaishnavites are mainly dualistic. They are deeply devotional. Their religion is rich in saints, temples and scriptures.

## Smartism

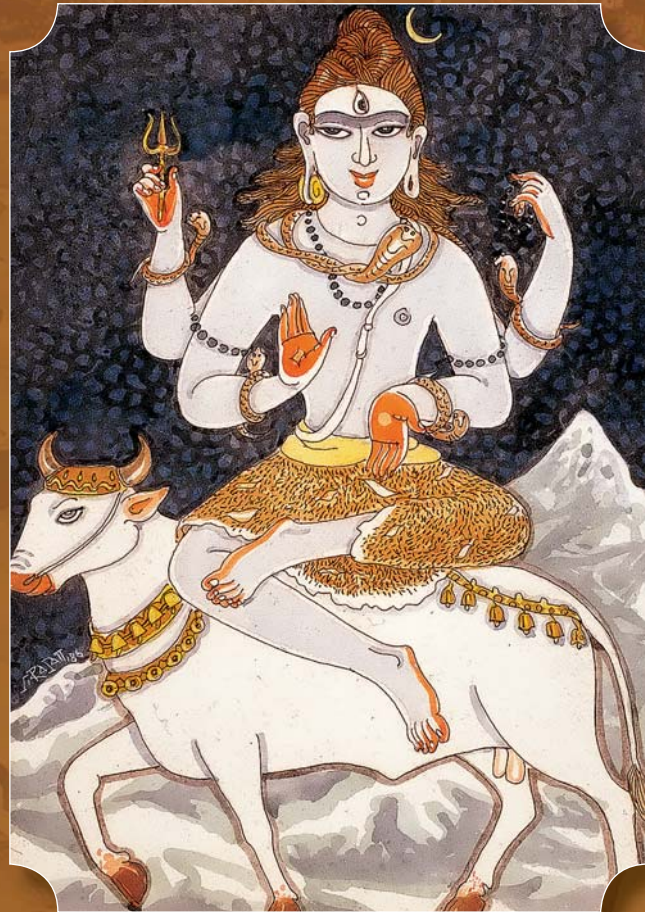
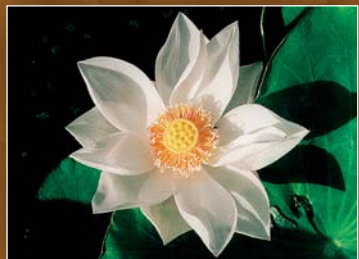
Smartas worship the Supreme in one of six forms: Ganesha, Siva, Sakti, Vishnu, Surya and Skanda. Because they accept all the major Hindu Gods, they are known as liberal or nonsectarian. They follow a philosophical, meditative path, emphasizing man's oneness with God through understanding.

For over 200 years, Western scholars have struggled to understand Hinduism, a faith whose followers seemed (to outsiders) to arbitrarily worship any one of a dozen Gods as the Supreme, a religion vastly diverse in its beliefs, practices and ways of worship. Some Indologists labeled the Hinduism they encountered polytheistic; others even coined new terms, like *henotheism*, to describe this baffling array of spiritual traditions. Few, however, have realized, and fewer still have written, that India's Sanatana Dharma, or "eternal faith," known today as Hinduism and comprising nearly a billion followers, is a family of religions with four principal denominations—Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. This single perception is essential for understanding Hinduism and explaining it accurately to others. Contrary to prevailing misconceptions, Hindus all worship a one Supreme Being, though by different names. For Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu is God. For Saivites, God is Siva. For Shaktas, Goddess Shakti is supreme. For Smartas, liberal Hindus, the choice of Deity is left to the devotee. Each has a multitude of guru lineages, religious leaders, priesthoods, sacred literature, monastic communities, schools, pilgrimage centers and tens of thousands of temples. They possess a wealth of art and architecture, philosophy and scholarship. These four sects hold such divergent beliefs that each is a complete and independent religion. Yet, they share a vast heritage of culture and belief—karma, dharma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity, temple worship, sacraments, manifold Deities, the guru-*shishya* tradition and the *Vedas* as scriptural authority. In this eight-page Insight, drawn from Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami's *Dancing with Siva*, we offer a synopsis of these four denominations, followed by a point-by-point comparison.

Each of Hinduism's philosophies, schools and lineages shares a common purpose: to further the soul's unfoldment to its divine destiny. Nowhere is this process better represented than in the growth of the renowned lotus, which, seeking the sun, arises from the mud to become a magnificent flower. Its blossom is a promise of purity and perfection.

## What Is the Deeply Mystical Saiva Sect?

Saivism is the world's oldest religion. Worshiping God Siva, the compassionate One, it stresses potent disciplines, high philosophy, the guru's centrality and bhakti-raja-siddha yoga leading to oneness with Siva within. Aum.

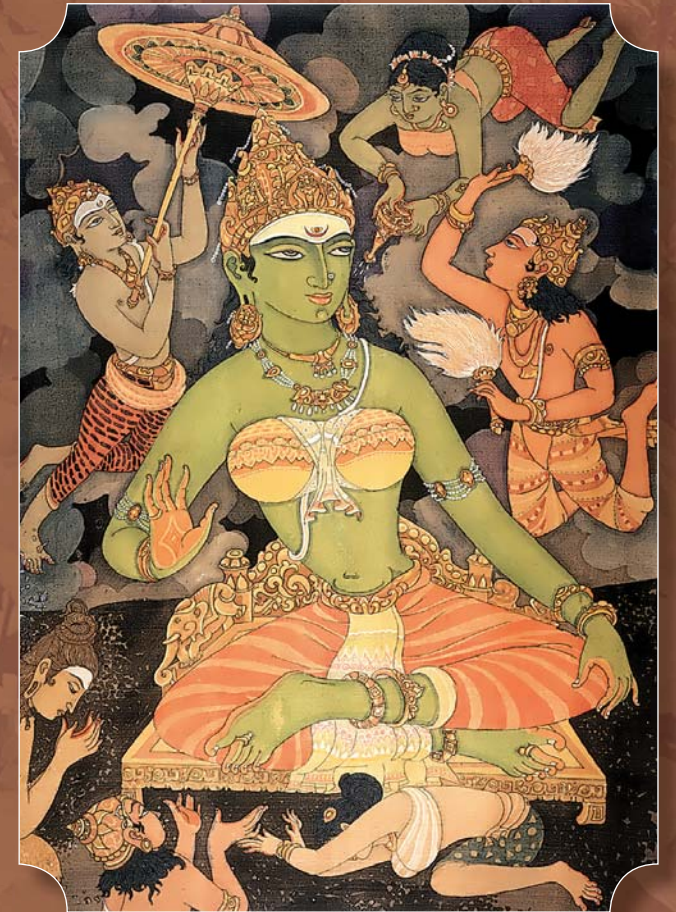


ART BY S. RAJAM

Seated on Nandi, his bull mount, the perfect devotee, Lord Siva holds *japa* beads and the trident, symbol of love-wisdom-action, and offers blessings of protection and fearlessness. Mount Kailas, His sacred Himalayan abode, represents the pinnacle of consciousness.

## What Is the Magic and Power Of Shaktism?

Shaktism reveres the Supreme as the Divine Mother, Shakti or Devi, in Her many forms, both gentle and fierce. Shaktas use mantra, tantra, yantra, yoga and puja to invoke cosmic forces and awaken the kundalini power. Aum.



Shakti, depicted in Her green form, radiates beauty, energy, compassion and protection for followers. Wearing the tilaka of the Shakta sect on Her forehead, She blesses devotees, who shower rosewater, hold an umbrella and prostrate at Her feet.

**S**AIVISM IS ANCIENT, TRULY AGELESS, FOR IT HAS NO beginning. It is the precursor of the many-faceted religion now termed Hinduism. Scholars trace the roots of Siva worship back more than 8,000 years to the advanced Indus Valley civilization. But sacred writings tell us there never was a time when Saivism did not exist. Modern history records six main schools: Saiva Siddhanta, Pashupatism, Kashmir Saivism, Vira Saivism, Siddha Siddhanta and Siva Advaita. Saivism's grandeur and beauty are found in a practical culture, an enlightened view of man's place in the universe and

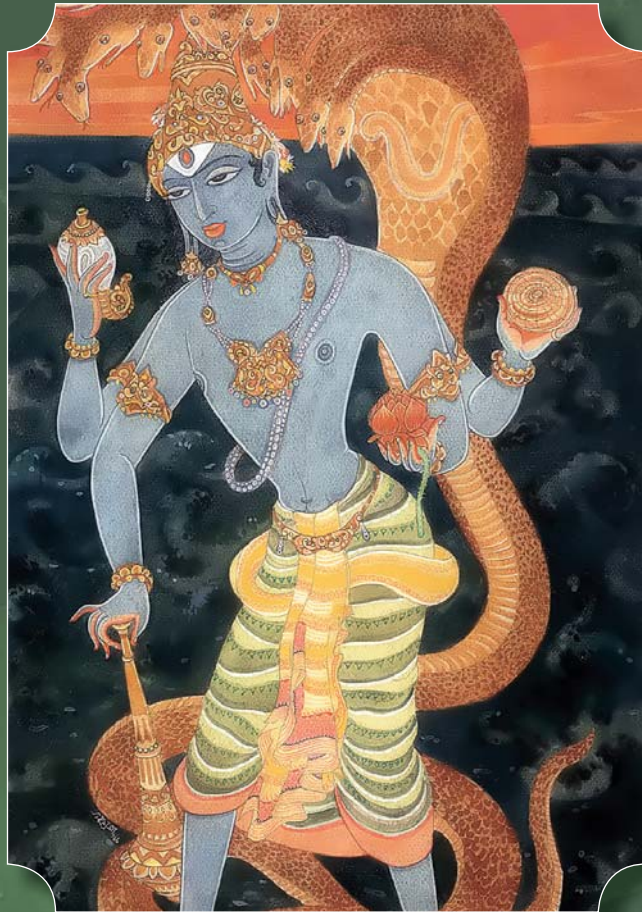
a profound system of temple mysticism and siddha yoga. It provides knowledge of man's evolution from God and back to God, of the soul's unfoldment and awakening guided by enlightened sages. Like all the sects, its majority are devout families, headed by hundreds of orders of swamis and *sadhus* who follow the fiery, world-renouncing path to *moksha*. The *Vedas* state, "By knowing Siva, the Auspicious One who is hidden in all things, exceedingly fine, like film arising from clarified butter, the One embracer of the universe—by realizing God, one is released from all fetters." Aum Namah Sivaya.

**W**HILE WORSHIP OF THE DIVINE MOTHER EXTENDS beyond the pale of history, Shakta Hinduism arose as an organized sect in India around the fifth century. Today it has four expressions—devotional, folk-shamanic, *yogic* and universalist—all invoking the fierce power of Kali or Durga, or the benign grace of Parvati or Ambika. Shakta devotionalists use *puja* rites, especially to the Shri Chakra *yantra*, to establish intimacy with the Goddess. Shamanic Shaktism employs magic, trance mediumship, firewalking and animal sacrifice for healing, fertility, prophecy and power.

Shakta *yogis* seek to awaken the sleeping Goddess Kundalini and unite her with Siva in the *sahasrara chakra*. Shakta universalists follow the reformed Vedantic tradition exemplified by Sri Ramakrishna. "Left-hand" *tantric* rites transcend traditional ethical codes. Shaktism is chiefly *advaitic*, defining the soul's destiny as complete identity with the Unmanifest, Siva. Central scriptures are the *Vedas*, *Shakta Agamas* and *Puranas*. The *Devi Gita* extols, "We bow down to the universal soul of all. Above and below and in all four directions, Mother of the universe, we bow." Aum Chandikayai Namah.

## What Is the Devotional Vaishnava Sect?

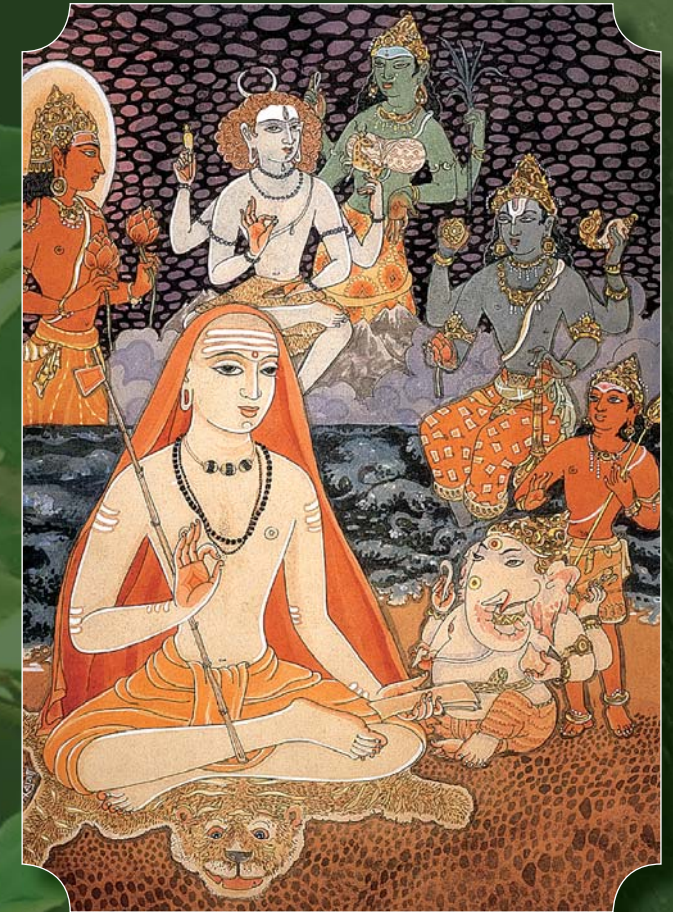
Vaishnavism is an ancient Hindu sect centering on the worship of Lord Vishnu and His incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama. Largely dualistic, profoundly devotional, it is rich in saints, temples and scriptures. Aum.



Vishnu is the infinite ocean from which the world emerges. He stands on waves, surrounded by the many-headed Seshanaga, who represents agelessness and is regarded as an extension of divine energy and an incarnation of Balarama, Lord Krishna's brother.

## What Is the Universalistic Smarta Sect?

Smartism is an ancient brahminical tradition reformed by Shankara in the ninth century. Worshiping six forms of God, this liberal Hindu path is monistic, nonsectarian, meditative and philosophical. Aum.



Adi Sankara lived from 788 to 820 CE, a mere 32 years, yet he gave Hinduism a new liberal denomination—Smartism. Here, wearing sacred marks, he holds his writings and is flanked by the six Deities of the Smarta altar: Surya the Sun, Siva, Shakti, Vishnu, Kumaran and Ganesha.

**T**HE WORSHIP OF VISHNU, MEANING "PERVADER," dates back to Vedic times. The Pancharatra and Bhagavata sects were popular prior to 300 bce. Today's five Vaishnava schools emerged in the middle ages, founded by Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha and Chaitanya. Vaishnavism stresses *prapatti*, single-pointed surrender to Vishnu, or His ten or more incarnations, called *avatars*. *Japa* is a key devotional *sadhana*, as is ecstatic chanting and dancing, called *kirtana*. Temple worship and festivals are elaborately observed. Philosophically, Vaishnavism ranges from Madh-

va's pure dualism to Ramanuja's qualified nondualism to Vallabha's nearly monistic vision. God and soul are everlastingly distinct. The soul's destiny, through God's grace, is to eternally worship and enjoy Him. While generally nonascetic, advocating *bhakti* as the highest path, Vaishnavism has a strong monastic community. Central scriptures are the *Vedas*, *Vaishnava Agamas*, *Itihasas* and *Puranas*. The *Bhagavad Gita* states, "On those who meditate on Me and worship with undivided heart, I confer attainment of what they have not, and preserve what they have." Aum Namō Narayanaya.

**S**MARTA MEANS A FOLLOWER OF CLASSICAL SMRITI, particularly the *Dharma Shastras*, *Puranas* and *Itihasas*. Smartas revere the Vedas and honor the *Agamas*. Today this faith is synonymous with the teachings of Adi Shankara, the monk-philosopher known as *shanmata sthapanacharya*, "founder of the six-sect system." He campaigned India-wide to consolidate the Hindu faiths of his time under the banner of Advaita Vedanta. To unify the worship, he popularized the ancient Smarta five-Deity altar—Ganapati, Surya, Vishnu, Siva and Shakti—and added Kumara. From these, dev-

otees may choose their "preferred Deity," or *Ishta Devata*. Each God is but a reflection of the one *Saguna Brahman*. Shankara organized hundreds of monasteries into a ten-order, *dashanami* system, which now has five pontifical centers. He wrote profuse commentaries on the *Upanishads*, *Brahma Sutras* and *Bhagavad Gita*. Sankara proclaimed, "It is the one Reality which appears to our ignorance as a manifold universe of names and forms and changes. Like the gold of which many ornaments are made, it remains in itself unchanged. Such is Brahman, and That art Thou." Aum Namah Sivaya.