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978-1-108-00791-7 - A View of the History, Literature, and Religion of the Hindoos,

Volume 1: Objects of Worship

William Ward

Excerpt

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THE
HINDOO MYTHOLOGY.



BOOK I.
OBJECTS OF WORSHIP.



CHAP. I.
OF GOD.

IT is a painful reflection to every benevolent mind, that not a single Hindoo temple, dedicated to the **ONE GOD**, is to be found in all Hindoost'han; nor is any act of worship, in any form, addressed by this people to God. The doctrines respecting the Divine Nature are considered as mere philosophical speculations, totally unconnected with religious services.

It is true, indeed, that the Hindoos believe in the unity of God. 'One Brümhü, without a second,' is a phrase very commonly used by them when conversing on subjects which relate to the nature of God. They believe also that God is almighty, allwise, omnipresent, omniscient, &c. and they frequently speak of him as embracing in his government the happiness of the good, and the subjection or punishment of the bad: yet they have no idea of God's performing any act, either of creation or providence, except through the gods; and thus are prevented all the beneficial effects which might have arisen out of their

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notions of the divine perfections : for in the whole of the reigning superstition the gods alone are seen ; and these gods bear no more resemblance to the one true God, than darkness to light, than vice to virtue.

Perceiving, therefore, that the speculations of the Hindoo philosophers on the divine nature have no place whatever in the religion of the country, I have placed these dogmas in the preceding volume.

 CHAP. II.

OF THE GODS.

THE deities in the Hindoo pantheon amount to 330,000,000. Yet all these gods and goddesses may be resolved into the three principal ones, Vishnoo, Shivü, and Brümha ; the elements ; and the three females, Doorga, Lükshmëë, and Sürüswütëë. The following pages will contain accounts of all those at present worshipped by the Hindoos, particularly in the provinces of India under the English government.

 SECT. I.—*Vishnoo*.

THIS god is represented in the form of a black man, with four arms ; in one of which he holds a club, in another a shell, in the third a chükrü^a, and in the fourth a water-lily. He rides on Gūroorü, an animal half-bird and half-man, and wears yellow garments.

^a An iron instrument of destruction like a wheel.

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The Hindoo shastrūs give accounts of ten appearances or incarnations of Vishnoo, in the character of the Preserver; nine of which are said to be past.

The first is called the Mūtsyū incarnation. Brūmhū^b, the one God, when he resolves to recreate the universe after a periodical destruction, first gives birth to Brūmha, Vīshnoo, and Shivū, to preside over the work of creation, preservation, and destruction. After a periodical dissolution of the universe, the four védūs remained in the waters. In order to enter upon the work of creation, it was necessary to obtain these books, for the instruction of Brūmha. Vishnoo was therefore appointed to bring up the védūs from the deep; who, taking the form of a fish, (some say one kind and some another,) descended into the waters, and brought up these sacred books.

In the Kūchyūpū incarnation Vishnoo assumed the form of a tortoise, and took the newly created earth upon his back, to render it stable. The Hindoos believe that to this hour the earth is supported on the back of this tortoise.

The Vūrahū incarnation happened at one of the periodical destructions of the world, when the earth sunk into the waters. Vishnoo, the preserver, appearing in the form of a boar (vūrahū), descended into the waters, and with his tusks drew up the earth. What contemptible ideas on such a subject! The earth, with all its mountains, &c. &c. made fast on the back of a turtle, or drawn up from the deep by the tusks of a hog!

^b The reader will please to keep in mind that Brūmhū means the one God, and that Brūmha means the idol of that name.

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The fourth incarnation is called Nürü-singhü^c. Among other descendants of Dūkshū, (the first man that Brümha created,) was Kūshyūpū, a moonee, and his four wives, Ditee, Ūditee, Vinūta, and Kūd-roo. From Ditee, sprang the giants; from Ūditee, the gods; from Vinūta, Gū-roorū; and from Kūd-roo, the hydras. The giants possessed amazing strength, and amongst them two arose of terrific powers, named Hirūnyakshū and Hirūnyū-kūshipoo, both of whom performed religious austerities many thousand years to obtain immortality. Brümha at length gave them a blessing apparently equivalent to that which they desired. He promised, that no common being should destroy them; that they should not die either in the day or in the night, in earth or in heaven, by fire, by water, or by the sword. After this these giants conquered all the kingdoms of the earth, and even dethroned Indrū, the king of heaven. Indrū, collecting all the gods, went to Brümha, and intreated him to provide some way of deliverance, as the universe which he had created was destroyed. Brümha asked the gods, how he could destroy those who had obtained his blessing? and advised them to go to Vishnoo. They obeyed, and informed this god of the miseries brought upon the universe by these giants whom Brümha had blessed. Narayūnū promised to destroy them, which he did in the following manner: Hirūnyū-kūshipoo's son Prūlhādū was constantly absent from home performing religious austerities, at which his father became angry, and, tying a stone to his body, threw him into the water; but Vishnoo descended; and liberated him. His father next threw him under the feet of an elephant; but the elephant took him up, and put him on its back. He then built a house of sealing wax, put his son into it, and set it on fire; the wax melted, and

^c From nürü, a man; and singhū, a lion.

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fell upon Prülhadü, but he received no injury. The father next gave him poison, but without effect. At length, wearied of trying to kill him, he said, 'Where does your preserver Vishnoo dwell?' 'He is every where,' says Prülhadü. 'Is he then in this pillar?' 'Yes,' said the son. 'Then,' said Hirünyü-küshipoo, 'I will kill him,' and gave the pillar a blow with his stick—when Vishnoo, in the form of half-lion, half-man, burst from the pillar; laid hold of Hirünyü-küshipoo by the thighs with his teeth, and tore him up the middle. This was in the evening, so that it was neither in the day nor in the night; it was done under the droppings of the thatch, about which the Hindoos have a proverb, that this place is out of the earth; he was not killed by a man, but by a being half-man, half-lion: so that the promise of Brümha to him was not broken. Vishnoo next destroyed Hirünyakshü. After the death of his father, Prülhadü began to worship Vishnoo under the form which he had assumed, and with tears enquired into the future fate of his father. Vishnoo assured him, that as he had died by his hands, he would surely ascend to heaven. Vishnoo was so pleased with the praises which Prülhadü bestowed on him, that he began to dance, hanging the entrails of Hirünyü-küshipoo round his neck. By Vishnoo's dancing the earth began to move out of its place, so that Brümha and all the gods were frightened, but durst not go near him. However, at the entreaties of Prülhadü, Vishnoo gave over dancing; the earth became fixed, and Vishnoo gave Prülhadü this promise, that by his hands none of his race should die.

The fifth is the Vamünü incarnation. Prülhadü's grandson Bulee followed the steps of his great-grandfather, and committed every kind of violence. In contempt of the gods, he made offerings in his own name. He performed the üshwümeddhü sacrifice one hundred times, by which he

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was entitled to become the king of the gods ; but as the time of the then reigning Indrū was not expired, the latter applied for relief to Vishnoo, who promised to destroy this giant : to accomplish which he caused himself to be born of Ūditee, the wife of Kūshyūpū, the moonee. Being exceedingly small in his person, he obtained the name of Vamūnū, i. e. the dwarf. At a certain period king Būlee was making a great sacrifice, and Vamūnū's parents, being very poor, sent him to ask a gift of the king. It is customary, at a festival, to present gifts to bramhūns. Vamūnū was so small, that in his journey to the place of sacrifice, when he got to the side of a hole made by a cow's foot, and which was filled with water, he thought it was a river, and entreated another bramhūn to help him over it. On his arrival, he went to ask a gift of Būlee. The king was so pleased with him, on account of his diminutive form, that he promised to give him whatever he should ask. He petitioned only for as much land as he could measure by three steps. Būlee pressed him to ask for more, intimating that such a quantity was nothing; but Vamūnū persisted, and the king ordered his priest to read the usual formulas in making such a present. The priest warned the king, declaring he would repent of making this gift; for the little bramhūn was no other than Vishnoo himself, who would deprive him of all he had. The king, however, was determined to fulfil his promise, and the grant was made. Vamūnū then placed one foot on Indrū's heaven, and the other on the earth, when, lo ! a third leg suddenly projected from his belly, and he asked for a place upon which he might rest this third foot. Būlee, having nothing left, and being unable to fulfil his promise, was full of anxiety. His wife, having heard what was going forward, came to the spot, and, seeing the king's perplexity, advised him to give his head for Vamūnū to set his foot upon. He did so; but Vamūnū then asked for what is called dūkshinū, a small

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present which accompanies a gift, and without which the gift itself produces no fruit to the giver. Būlee knew not what to do for dūkshinū : his all was gone. His wife advised him to give his life to Vamūnū as dūkshinū. He did this also; but the latter told him, that as he had promised Prūhadū not to destroy any of his race, he would not take his life. He therefore gave him his choice either of ascending to heaven, taking with him five ignorant persons; or of descending to patūlū, the world of the hydras, with five wise men^d. Būlee chose the latter, but said that as he had done much mischief on earth, he was afraid of going to patūlū, lest he should there be punished for his crimes. Vamūnū told him not to fear, as he would, in the form of Vishnoo, become his protector. At the close, this god, having restored every thing on earth to a state of order and prosperity, returned to heaven.

The sixth is the Pūrūshoo-ramū incarnation. Pūrūshoo is the name of an instrument of war. The occasion of this appearance of Vishnoo is thus related:—The kshūtriyūs, from the king to the lowest person of this cast, were become very corrupt. Every one did as he pleased, the king was without authority, all order was destroyed, and the earth was in the greatest confusion. In these circumstances the goddess Prit'hivēē^e went to Vishnoo, and prayed for relief. Her petition was heard, and one part of Vishnoo was incarnate as the son of Jūmūdūgnee, a descendant of Bhrigoo the sage. After twenty-one different defeats the kshūtriyūs were exterminated by Pūrūshoo-ramū; but after a lapse of years they again became numerous: Ūrjooñ, a

^d It is a proverb among the Hindoos, that there is no pleasure in the company of the ignorant in any place or circumstances; and that a bad place, in the company of the wise, is better than a good one in that of the ignorant.

^e The earth personified.

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kshūtriyū king with a thousand arms, overcame the greatest monarchs, and made dreadful havock in the world : he beat Ravūnū, and tied him to the heels of a horse ; but Brūmha delivered him, and reconciled them again. One evening in the rainy season, Ūrjoonū, being in the forest, took refuge in the hut of Jūmūdūgnee, the learned ascetic. He had with him 900,000 people; yet Jūmūdūgnee entertained them all. Ūrjoonū, astonished, enquired of his people how the sage, living in the forest, was able to entertain so many people? They could not tell; they saw nothing except a cow which Brūmha had given him ; but it was by her means perhaps that he was able to entertain so many guests: its name was Kamū-dhénoo^f. In fact, when Ūrjoonū was to be entertained at the sage's house, this cow in a miraculous manner gave him all kinds of food, clothes, &c. The king on his departure asked for the cow; but the sage refused it to him, though he offered for it his whole kingdom. At length, Ūrjoonū made war on Jūmūdūgnee; and though the cow gave an army to her master, he was unable to cope with Ūrjoonū, who destroyed both him and his army. After the victory, however, Ūrjoonū could not find the cow, but went home disappointed. Pūrūshoo-ramū, hearing of the defeat and death of his father Jūmūdūgnee, went to complain to Shivū, on the mountain Koilasū; but could not get access to him till he had knocked down the gods Gūnēshū and Kartikū, Shivū's door-keepers. Shivū gave Pūrūshoo-ramū the instrument pūrūshoo, and promised him the victory. On his return Pūrūshoo-ramū met his mother, who was about to throw herself on the funeral pile of her husband. After attending upon this ceremony, Pūrūshoo-ramū went to the residence of Ūrjoonū, and killed him^g.

^f That is, the cow which yields every thing desired.

^g This story is told variously in the pooranūs; according to the

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These six incarnations are said to have taken place in the sūtyū yoogū^h. There are no images respecting them made for worship.

The seventh incarnation is that of Raṃū to destroy the giant Ravūnū; for the history of which see the Translation of the Table of Contents of the Ramayūnū, toward the close of this volume.—The eight incarnation is that of Būlūramū, to destroy Prūlūmbū and other giants. This latter incarnation is said to have taken place in the dwapūrū-yoogū.—The ninth is the Booddhū incarnation, in which Vishnoo appeared as Booddhū, to destroy the power of the giants. In order to effect this, Booddhū produced among mankind by his preaching, &c. a disposition to universal scepticism; that having no longer any faith in the gods, the giants might cease to apply to them for those powers by which they had become such dreadful scourges to mankind. In this appearance the object of Vishnoo, the preserver, was accomplished by art, without the necessity of war; though the dreadful alternative to which he was driven to accomplish his object, that of plunging mankind into a state of universal scepticism, affords another proof how wretchedly the world would be governed if every thing depended on the wisdom of man.—The tenth incarnation is still expected, under the name of the Kūlkee ūvūtarū. See translation from the Kūlkee pooranū, in the second volume.

The appearance of Vishnoo, when he took the name of Krishnū to destroy the giant Kūngshū, is called the descent

Ramayūnū, Vūshis'thū was the owner of this cow, and Vishwūmitrū the person who fought with the moonee to obtain it.

^h These ravages of tyranny, and bloody contests, form a sad specimen of the happiness of the Hindoo sūtyū yoogū, could we believe that there ever had been such a period.

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of Vishnoo himself, and not an incarnation of this god. There are, however, beside the preceding ten incarnations, and this of Krishnū, many others mentioned in the pooranūs, all having their source in Vishnoo.—The Shrēē-bhagū-vūtū contains accounts of the following : Soo-yūgnū created certain gods, and removed distress from the three worlds ;—Kūpilū taught his mother the knowledge of Brūmhū, by which she obtained absorption ;—Dūttatrēyū delivered all his disciples, by means of the ceremony called yogū, from future birth, and obtained for them absorption ;—Koormarū declared the events that had happened in a former age ; that is, previous to the dissolution of things which preceded his incarnation ;—Nūrū-Narayūnū was such a perfect ascetic that the courtezans, sent by the gods to allure him from his religious austerities, were unsuccessful ; Vishnoo himself created a female on purpose to divert him from his devotions, but her attempts were equally abortive ;—Prit'hoo opened the bowels of the earth, and brought forth its treasures ;—Rishūvū was an incomparable yogēē, who was worshipped by the pūrūm-hūngsūs and other ascetics ;—Hūyūgrēēvū was so great a saint, that the words of the védū were uttered every time he breathed ;—Hūree delivered his disciples from all their enemies, whether among men or the inferior animals ;—Hūngsū taught his disciples the mysteries of yogū, and obtained absorption himself while performing the ceremonies of a yogēē ;—Mūnoo's fame filled the three worlds, and ascended even as far as Sūtyū-lokū ;—Dhūnwūntūree delivered all diseased persons from their disorders on their mere remembrance of his name, and gave the water of immortality to the gods ;—Vyasū arranged the védūs, was the author of the pooranūs, &c.—Vibhoo was the spiritual guide of 80,000 disciples, whom he taught the knowledge of Brūmhū, and the ceremonies of yogū ;—Sūtyūsēnū cleared the earth of hypocrites and wicked per-