

The Evolution of Hindu Deities from Vedic to Purāṇic Ages : Some Examples

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Introduction

To assert that the divine pantheon of the Hinduism has undergone profound structural and morphological transformations across epochs often invites scepticism. Nevertheless, a critical synthesis of textual, historical, and archaeological evidence demonstrates an undeniable evolutionary trajectory—characterized by the gradual eclipse of early deities, the reinterpretation of existing personae, and the emergence of new devotional figures.

This trajectory reflects the broader institutional shifts within Hinduism over millennia: the transition from shared communal Vedic sacrificial rituals (*yajna*) to individualized image-based devotion (*pujā*), the philosophical systematization of the six classical schools, and the development of formal iconographic canons from early aniconic traditions.

A comparative analysis of the Rigveda (around c. 1500 BCE)¹ and the major Purāṇas (such as the *Vāyu*, *Matsya*, and *Mārkaṇḍeya*, c. 3rd–5th century CE),² highlights this paradigm shift. Within Purāṇic literature, Vedic deities are fundamentally re-conceptualized, giving rise to distinct sectarian traditions (*sampradāyas*) centred on specific supreme divinities. To illustrate this continuous evolution, this study examines key thematic shifts across a selected group of major

figures: Indra, Agni, Mitra-Varuna, Brahmā, Vishnu, Rudra-Shiva, and the Asuras. The specific historical mechanisms, precise chronological layers, archaeological attestations, and internal theological reconciliations of these shifts remain beyond the scope of this paper.

Indra

Vedic Dominance

Our analysis logically commences with Indra, who functions as the paramount deity within the Vedic pantheon. His centrality is evidenced quantitatively in the Rigveda (RV), where approximately 250 of the 1,028 hymns are dedicated exclusively to his praise.³ The Vedic rishis (seers) accord him numerous epithets and multiple personalities, predominantly portraying him as an invincible warrior-hero, divine commander, and martial protector. Iconographically, he is depicted traversing the heavens in a radiant chariot pulled by spirited steeds, wielding the *vajra*—a multi-faceted cosmic weapon—as his primary projectile. Consequently, mortal kings frequently invoked his power to secure victory in battle (RV 7.18).

One of Indra's main achievements is slaying of the demon Vritra, wherein he splits the mountains to release the pent-up waters, thereby earning the defining epithet 'Vritrahan' (Slayer of Vritra)

(RV 1.32, 10.48). Beyond his purely martial domain, alternative narratives illustrate a broader functional repertoire. Notably, in the myth of the *Panis* (RV 10.108), wherein the cows and dawns are liberated from captivity, Indra operates not through raw physical force, but using liturgical power, assuming the role of a presiding priest whose spoken truth (*rita*) accomplishes the task.

His sacrificial persona is equally distinct: he is characterized by a prodigious appetite, consuming buffalo or bull meat alongside vast quantities of *Soma*, the divine elixir that causes his belly to expand like an ocean (RV 1.8.7). His chief consort is Indrāni. Crucially, despite his undisputed dominance, the specific title ‘Devarāja’ (King of the gods) remains absent from the early Vedic corpus.

The Buddha and Indra

Indra’s cultural influence persisted across religious boundaries; in Buddhist canonical literature, he appears as Shakra, most prominently during events such as the Buddha’s descent from the *Trāyastriṃśa* (thirty-three) heaven, where both Indra and Brahmā act as subordinate devotees attending upon the Buddha.⁴ Historically, King Ajatashatru (480 BCE) is recorded as worshipping Indra before his war with the Vrijis in the *Digha Nikāya* commentaries.

Purāṇic transformation and marginalization

Over the subsequent three and half millennia, Indra underwent significant marginalization within the Hindu pantheon. A central catalyst for this decline was the paradigm shift from early Vedic ritualism to Purāṇic bhakti (devotionalism). While the Purāṇas retain Indra as the sovereign king of the gods (Devarāja), his stature is markedly subordinate to that of the supreme deities, like Vishnu and Shiva.

His primary iconographic and mythological attributes were also formalized during this transition: his cosmic weapon, the *vajra*, was reinterpreted primarily as a thunderbolt, his consort was identified as Shachi, his mount as the celestial elephant Airāvata, and his domain was increasingly associated with aesthetic pleasures such as music and dance.

In contrast to his virtually invincible persona in the Rigveda, the Purāṇic Indra is frequently depicted as vulnerable, repeatedly suffering defeats at the hands of asuras and requiring the intervention of Brahmā, Vishnu or Shiva (*Vishnu* Purāṇa 1.9, *Bhāgavata* Purāṇa 8.1.4–16). A seminal narrative illustrating this loss of ritual preeminence occurs in the *Harivamsha* (2.16), wherein Krishna successfully halts the traditional Indra-yajna in favor of worshipping Mount Govardhana. Furthermore, epics such as the *Ramayana* (1.48–49) emphasize his ethical vulnerabilities, explicitly highlighting his moral transgressions and the resultant curse imposed upon him by the sage Gautama.

Agni

Vedic Dominance

As the addressee of the opening invocation of the Rigveda (*agnimile purohitam...*, RV 1.1.1), Agni stands as the most prominent deity within the Vedic pantheon second only to Indra, with nearly 200 hymns dedicated to his praise.⁵ In Vedic ritualism, Agni serves as an indispensable intermediary, establishing a locus of connection between mortal supplicants and the celestial realm through the sacred fire. As priests pronounce the sacrificial utterance (*svāhā*) and offer oblations into the fire, Agni—conceived as possessing seven tongues of flame—

conveys these offerings directly to the gods, thereby earning the epithet ‘Havyavāhana’ (carrier of oblations) (10.118.5). His functional complexity is mirrored in his rich epithetics, including ‘Pāvaka’ (the purifier) and ‘Jātavedas’, an ambiguous term denoting either his innate omniscience from birth or his association with the origin of the Vedas.⁶

Vedic poets portrayed Agni as tawny-haired, thousand-eyed, and thousand-horned (RV 1.79.12). While his radiance is frequently analogized to the Sun, his destructive, consuming capacity is equally recognized—most prominently in his specialized, potentially polluting manifestation as the cremation fire (‘Kravayād’) in funeral liturgies (RV 10.16.10).

Purānic reclassification

In the Purānic literature, while Agni retains his fundamental role as the divine messenger, his theological primacy is notably reduced. He is reclassified as one of the ‘Ashtadikpāla’ (guardian of eight directions), enumerated among the eight ‘Vasus’, and conceptualized as one of the five foundational elements (*Pancabhuta*). Mythologically, his consort is personified as ‘Svāhā’.

The concept of Agni underwent significant philosophical and physiological internalization. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (15.14), Krishna identifies himself with ‘Vaishvānara’, the divine digestive fire residing within living beings. This physiological reinterpretation finds its fullest expression in Ayurvedic literature, such as the *Caraka Samhitā*, where Agni is categorized into metaphorical metabolic forces—most notably *Jatharāgni* (the primary digestive capacity) and *Dhātvāgni* (tissue-level metabolic systems)—essential for maintaining metabolic equilibrium.⁷

Mitra and Varuna

Among the Ādityas, Mitra and Varuna represent two of the most significant deities within the early Vedic pantheon. Frequently invoked as a dual divinity (Mitravaruna) across numerous Rigvedic hymns, they also receive independent liturgical addresses that delineate their distinct functional and cosmic roles.

Varuna: From Imperial Sovereign to Ruler of the Waters

In early Vedic cosmology, Varuna is elevated as a supreme sovereign ‘Samrāj’ (RV 1.136.1), whose jurisdiction encompasses both divine and mortal realms. His celestial abode is depicted as an expansive golden palace supported by a thousand pillars and entered through a thousand doors, (RV 5.62.6) with the deity himself arrayed in golden vestments. Characterized by an all-seeing vision facilitated by solar rays, Varuna maintains the cosmic, moral, and ritual order (*rita*). His decrees regulate celestial dynamics, dictating the movements of the sun, moon, and stars (RV 1.24.8). To enforce cosmic order, he employs secret emissaries or spies (*spashah*) (RV 1.25.13). Furthermore, Varuna possesses *māyā*—the creative or mysterious power of transformation—a concept distinct from its later metaphysical re-formulation in Advaita Vedanta.

Over time, Varuna’s conceptualization shifted from a benevolent, celestial sovereign to a deity associated with fear, judgment, and binding. In later Vedic literature like the *Atharvaveda* (4.16.6-7), emphasis shifted to his binding instrument, the noose (*pāsha*), leading supplicants to offer apotropaic prayers seeking deliverance from his wrath. In the *Ramayana* (1.57.9), Varuna is inseparable from his *pāsha*.

In the Purāṇic era, Varuna experienced a dramatic reduction in status. Deprived of his early imperial grandeur, he was transformed to a localized deity governing terrestrial and oceanic waters—a transition likely rooted in his earlier Rigvedic association with cosmic waters (e.g., RV 8.87.1). In the *Mahabharata*, his domain is relocated beneath the ocean, where he resides with his consort Varunāni. His subordination to emerging bhakti figures is exemplified in the *Harivamsha* (2.130), wherein Varuna is defeated in battle by Krishna and subsequently offers hymns in Krishna's praise.

Mitra

Mitra functions within the Rigveda as a solar deity associated with daylight and serving as a dynamic counterpart to Varuna. Though routinely invoked alongside Varuna, only a single hymn is dedicated exclusively to him (RV 3.59). The *Taittiriya Samhitā* (1.7.1) of *Krishna Yajurveda*, formally codifies their complementary duality, identifying Mitra with the day and Varuna with the night. Despite his early prominence as a guarantor of order and alliances, Mitra virtually disappears from active worship and the living Hindu pantheon in post-Vedic literature.

Brahmā

Brahmā, as conceptualized in classical Hinduism, is largely absent from the earliest stratum of Vedic literature. In the tenth mandala of the Rigveda, creator functions are instead distributed among several proto-creator figures. Most notably, Prajāpati appears as the lord and protector of creatures (RV 10.85.43). The *Hiranyagarbha-sukta* (RV 10.121) introduces the 'golden embryo' as the source of cosmic creation—a concept variously interpreted by authors as a solar

deity, the cosmic germ, or an abstract creator.⁸ Similarly, figures, such as Vishvakarman, are credited with fashioning the universe (RV 10.82). The absence of Brahma as an independent, fully articulated deity in the core Vedic hymns serves as a major indicator of theological evolution.

The Transmutation of Prajāpati

In the later Vedic Brāhmaṇa texts, Prajāpati ascends to theological prominence as the supreme lord of sacrifice and creation. Early mythological layers associate him with his daughter Ushas or Ushā and his consort Rohini. As the pantheon evolved into the epic period, the title Prajāpati shifted: the *Ramayana* references a plurality of Prajāpatis (progenitors). Ultimately, during the Purāṇic transition, the functional identity of Prajāpati was subsumed into the persona of Brahmā.

Purāṇic Cosmology

In Purāṇic literature, Brahmā is formalized as grandfather (*Pitāmaha*) and the creator god among the 'Trimurti' (comprising Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva). He is depicted as four-faced ('Chaturmukha'), seated upon a lotus arising from the navel of Vishnu, and associated with the personified Gāyatri. Cosmologically, he presides over vast temporal cycles: a single day of Brahmā (*kalpa*) equals 1,000 *mahāyugas*, spanning the reigns of fourteen successive Manus. Nightfall brings cosmic dissolution (*pralaya*), followed by a new cycle of creation by him at dawn.

Despite his high cosmic function, Brahmā never developed a sustained devotional cult (bhakti) or an independent sect, leaving his status secondary to that of Vishnu and Shiva. Notably, his name mirrors the title of Brahmā—the chief supervising priest in Vedic ritual literature (*Shatapatha*

Brāhmaṇa 11.1.6), underscoring the deep conceptual link between sacrificial authority and cosmic creation.

Vishnu

The Vedic Antecedents

While Vishnu occupies a central position as the supreme deity in classical and contemporary Hinduism, his stature within the early Vedic pantheon is comparatively modest. In the *Rigveda*, only five complete hymns are dedicated exclusively to him.⁹ In this early context, Vishnu is predominantly characterized as a solar deity and a trusted ally of Indra, who appears alongside Indra fairly often, particularly in his battle with Vritra (RV 4.18.11, 6.20.2).

In the *Rigveda*, he is depicted as a youthful, expansive deity armed with a bow and arrow, noted for his three wide cosmic strides (‘Urukrama’, ‘Urugāya’). Two of these great strides are visible to mortals, while the third belongs to the inscrutable realm of the heavens, discernible only to the seers (RV 1.22.17–21). These strides are interpreted as a spatial metaphor encompassing the terrestrial, atmospheric, and celestial spheres.¹⁰

The historical trajectory of Vishnu from a minor solar deity to a supreme divinity and complex process of theological synthesis is summarized below.

Multiple Lineages and Syncretic Integration

Vishnu’s elevation to a supreme deity resulted from a gradual synthesis of Vishnu with three other distinct divine, heroic, and historical figures, namely Nārāyana, Vāsudeva, and Krishna.

Nārāyana—absent from the early *Samhitās*, emerges in the *Shatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (e.g., SB 12.3.4.1/13.6.1.1) as the primeval Cosmic Person (*Purusha*).

Some scholars think Nārāyan’s origin is rooted in non-Vedic traditions.¹¹

Vāsudeva originated as an apotheosized hero of the Vrishni-Sāttvata clan, a lineage explicitly acknowledged in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (10.37), where Krishna identifies himself as ‘Vāsudeva among the Vrishnis’. Epigraphic evidence confirms the antiquity of the Bhāgavata-Vāsudeva cult, most notably demonstrated by the Heliodorus Pillar inscription at Besnagar (ca. 2nd century BCE).

Textual evidence suggests a multiplicity of historical or mythological figures named Krishna prior to their ultimate assimilation into the Vaishnava pantheon. The *Rigveda* attributes several hymns (e.g., 8.85, 10.42) to a Rishi Krishna. The *Chāndogya Upanishad* (3.17.6) references Krishna Devakiputra as a disciple of the sage Ghora Angirasa. Patanjali’s *Mahābhāṣya* (3.1.26) (ca. 2nd century BCE) treats the narrative of Krishna and Kamsa as an established legendary tradition. In the Pāli Canon, the *Dīgha Nikāya* (e.g., *Ambattha Sutta*, DN 3) preserves memory of the seer Kanha and the Kanhāyana lineage.

Purānic Synthesis and Ascendancy

Vishnu’s ascending ritual status becomes evident in Late Vedic texts like the *Shatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (SB 14.1.1.1–6), where he is explicitly equated with the cosmic sacrifice.

By the early centuries of the Common Era, these disparate threads merged into a unified Vaishnava theology codified in the Mahāpurāṇas (including the *Vishnu*, *Garuda*, and *Bhāgavata* Purāṇa) and the *Harivamsha*. In this Purānic synthesis, Vishnu assumes his familiar four-armed iconographic form bearing the conch (*shankha*), discus (*chakra*), mace (*gadā*), and lotus (*padma*), riding the celestial eagle

Garuda. The Garuda emblem was adopted on imperial Gupta coinage (4th–5th centuries CE) as a mark of royal devotion (*paramabhāgavata*). Within the Purāṇic Trimurti, Vishnu functions as the preserver who periodically manifests as terrestrial incarnations (*avatāra*)—such as Vāmana, whose three steps explicitly reinterpret his Vedic three strides—to restore cosmic order.

In the dualistic (*Dvaita*) and qualified dualistic (*Vishishtādvaita*) schools of Vedānta, Vishnu is identified as Brahman, the ultimate reality with infinite attributes.

Notably, while medieval devotional poetry and later philosophical traditions heavily emphasize Rādhā as Krishna's primary spiritual consort and divine Shakti, her character is conspicuously absent from the early Mahāpurāṇas, representing a later development in the evolution of Vaishnava bhakti.

Shiva

Vedic Rudra: The feared one

Few deities within the Indian religious tradition exhibit a conceptual transformation as radical as that of Rudra-Shiva-Maheshvara, whose classical Purāṇic persona bears little resemblance to his early Vedic antecedent.

Within the Rīgvedic pantheon, Rudra functions as a minor yet deeply terrifying and malevolent deity, invoked exclusively in only three hymns. 'Maruts', his children, are more prominent in the Vedic texts.

His early iconography is notably complex and multifaceted. He is described as possessing matted hair ('Kapardin'), a red or copper-red complexion ('Tāmbra'), and alternating epithets such as blue-throated ('Nilagriva') or white-throated ('Sitikantha'). Crucially, the serene, benign and auspicious attributes that characterize

the Shiva of classical bhakti and Purāṇic literature are entirely absent in his initial Vedic portrayal.

Rudra's primary weapons are the bow and arrow, through which he dispenses disease and pestilence upon humans and livestock alike. This ambivalent, destructive aspect is most explicitly articulated in the Shatarudriya litany of the *Yajurveda* (*Taittiriya Samhitā* 4.5, *Vājasenīya Samhitā* 16–18), wherein devotees offer apotropaic prayers imploring him to divert his malignant shafts away from the community. Supplicants entreat him with the formulaic plea 'Mā himsih', beseeching him not to harm their kin or cattle and pray that his lethal arrows be rendered auspicious (shiva) and benevolent toward the sacrificial order. In the same litany, he is called as the healer of the gods and ruler of the serpents and demon. His character is associated with mountains and woods among various other things. In the *Sūtra* texts, he is unwelcome at the sacrificial rituals and remnants of the rituals are left for him at the north (*Āpstambha Dharma Sūtrā* 2.9.24.23).

Shiva: Transformation to the Benevolent one

Much like Vishnu, Shiva's significance began to elevate during the late Vedic period, attaining its full maturation in the Purāṇas. In one hymn in the *Vājasenīya Samhitā* (3.16), also known as the *Mahāmṛitunjaya mantra*, Rudra is glorified as the 'Tryambaka' (three-eyed) and prayed for immortality and liberation from the cycle of life and death. In the later parts of the same text (39.8–9) we find several epithets of Rudra ('Bhava, Sarva, Pashupati, Ishāna, Mahādeva, and Ugra') as the recipients of the sacrificial animals' vital organs.

In Purāṇic iconology, Shiva holds a *damaru* (pellet drum) and a *trishula*

(trident), rides the bull Nandi, and is depicted with one, three, or five faces. Throughout the Purānas and classical Sanskrit literature, he roams cremation grounds smeared with sacred ash, clad in a tiger skin, and adorned with serpents. When provoked to anger, the fire emanating from his third eye instantly reduces everything to ashes. As Natarāja, the ruler of dances, his cosmic dance of destruction (*pralaya-nritya*) marks the end of creation, paving the way for Brahmā to initiate a new cosmic cycle.

Upon closer textual examination, several thematic linkages emerge connecting the Purānic and Epic Shiva with the Vedic Rudra. For instance, the divine bow (*Hara-Dhanu*) in the *Ramayana* recalls the bow and arrow characteristic of Vedic Rudra. Beneath the formidable descriptions of Purānic Shiva lies the shadow of Rudra's fierce aspect (*ghora-rupa*). Similarly, the narrative of Daksha's sacrifice, where Shiva is initially excluded, reflects the ancient ritual custom of keeping Rudra at a distance from the sacrificial arena.

In Tantra, Shiva is worshipped along with Shakti, forming a complementary duality. *Shaivatantra* is a vast corpus of literature and hence, out of the scope of this article.

Shiva in Bengali Literature

However, perhaps the most dramatic transformation of Shiva occurred in the medieval Bengali literature like *Shivāyana*, where Shiva is re-imagined as an agrarian figure farming the land, charming snakes, and addicted to intoxicants. Furthermore, in the Bengali cultural imagination, the portrayal of Shiva as the husband of Goddess Durga inspired a vast body of vernacular literature.

In this context, it is worth noting that regarding the famous 'Yogi Seal' artifact

from Mohenjo-daro, frequently identified by many scholars as 'Pashupati Shiva', several compelling research papers challenging this identification have been published.¹² A detailed examination of this debate, however, lies beyond the scope of this article.

Asura

It is a little known fact that the Asuras too underwent an evolutionary trajectory like the gods. In the early layers of the Rigveda, the term 'Asura' denoted a lordly, divine, or formidable entity. Throughout these early strata, various principal Vedic deities—including Agni, Indra, and Varuna—are explicitly addressed with the honorific Asura (e.g. RV 5.14.1).¹³ In later layers of the same text, however, Asuras emerge as demonic entities hostile to the Devas, culminating in narratives such as Indra's slaying of Vritrāsura. While a detailed analysis of the underlying causes and chronological framework of this semantic shift lies beyond the scope of this essay, one comparative historical parallel merits attention: in ancient Iranian religion (Zoroastrianism), this semantic polarity is inverted, wherein the Iranian daevas represent demonic beings and ahura denotes the benevolent divine.

Forgotten and New Deities

As noted at the outset, several early deities gradually receded from active veneration. The Vedic deity Mitra has already been cited; however, numerous other examples illustrate this phenomenon. In the Rigveda, the sky deity Dyāus is invoked thirty-eight times, and virtually vanishes from the post-Vedic pantheon. Similarly, entities such as Apām Napāt, Mātarishvan, Aja Ekapād, Pushan, Brahmanaspati, and the Ribhus disappeared from Purānic mythology.

Conversely, newly emergent deities continually joined the pantheon, such as Manasā and Shitalā in the folk and medieval traditions. Most recently, a novel goddess became popular in 1975, whose devotional cult spread rapidly across the Indian subcontinent as millions sought her refuge with the chant ‘Jai Santoshi Mātā’ (Victory to Mother Santoshi), inspired by a Bollywood movie.

Epilogue

Over past three or four millennia, constant changes shaped the Sanātana Dharma, some of which were discussed in this article. A defining hallmark of Sanātana

Dharma is its adaptive dynamism—its capacity to recontextualize its praxis across shifting historical and socio-cultural epochs without compromising its foundational ontology. While its socio-religious expressions continuously adapt to temporal shifts, the core metaphysical imperatives articulated by the Vedic seers remain an immutable benchmark.

This apparent tension between empirical fluidity and metaphysical continuity is best captured by Swami Vivekananda, who noted that ‘The Hindu religion does not consist in struggles and attempts to believe a certain doctrine or dogma, but in realizing—not in believing, but in being and becoming.’¹⁴ ■

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