Indian Pantheons: Crash Course World Mythology #8

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta and this is Crash Course Mythology. Today, we're going to tackle one of the most difficult and fascinating pantheons in all of mythology. It's got dancing dwarfs, buffalo demons, and some many armed folks.

Yes sir, there's a lot going on in this pantheon! Maybe even more than in the Egyptian pantheon. Sorry Thoth.

In this episode, we'll talk about the pantheon of deities in Indian myths. Unlike myths from Egypt and the Ancient Near East, there are living people for whom these stories have deep, personal, religious meaning. Remember how it got a little uncomfortable when we discussed the Bible's creation story?

Well, it's gonna be a bit like that. But we're gonna try to minimize the awkwardness. Just ask - wait, there's no god of awkwardness?

Ruh roh.

[Opening music]

Discussing the Indian pantheon is tricky for two reasons. First, because it remains a living belief system for about a billion people. And second, because Indian religious and mythic traditions are not only abundant, but also ancient.

As in Egypt, there are different sets of gods and goddesses that were worshipped at different points in time. But unlike Egypt, India was and is home to many different languages, which means we have a lot of different stories, each with many different variations. We are going to focus mostly on stories that have been written in Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism.

Sanskrit first appears in written form around 150 CE in a series of rock inscriptions that look much more complex than what I've inscribed on rocks. This probably doesn't say "Parvati wuz here! Vishnu + Lakshmi 5eva."

Let's remember that Sanskrit is a complex language and its poetry may sound unusual to English ears. But we can handle it. Lead the way, Bragi, Norse God of poetry.

In the earliest Indian traditions, Dyaus, the sky father, and Prithvi. the earth mother, were central. Hey, sky dad and earth mom! Nice to see you over here, too! Do you mind if I drop off some cosmic laundry?

Later, however, Surya, the sun god, Agni, the fire god and Indra, the warrior king of the gods, took top God Billing from mom and dad, who were arguing all the time! Sky dad, earth mom, knock it off! Just stop the fighting! We can all get along.

Indra was the child of the sky and the earth, and was responsible for keeping them separate, but had his own beef with another god, Varuna, who may once have been the ruler of the gods, but was supplanted by Indra. Hey, even god's got beef, right? I wonder if one of them recorded a diss track.

Anyway, the most well-known myth about Indra is about his battle with Vritra, a giant serpent or dragon, whom Indra kills, thus creating the sun, the dawn, and the sky. (Yeah, I know – you thought we had sky covered, but mythology is tricky.) The death of Vritra also gave form to chaos. Which is nice.

So yup, it's our old friend the creation story, but with violence instead of sex. In a number of stories, Indra is described as battling and destroying hostile minor deities and demons. I mean, someone has to, right?

And so maybe, you're thinking yay, Indra. He fights the good fight. But he also breaks oaths,kills family members, and commits adultery with Ahalya, the wife of the sage Gvautama. For which he lost his testicles. Cherries emoji. Scissors emoji. Face screaming in emoji. But, hey wait, it's OK. In another myth he has them replaced with those of a ram (emoji). So I guess that worked out.

Indra's weapon of choice is a thunderbolt, similar to Zeus, and by India's classical age, he becomes a god of rain. And this changing function over time is generally emblematic of Indian myth. Like the Egyptian pantheon, it's difficult to pin down one canonical set of myths or characters because they appear in so many forms, often with multiple names.

Here's another version of how things get going: In the Vedas, which are the most ancient Hindu scriptures, Prajapati was the creator god, but over time, and especially in the Upanishads, another collection of important Sanskrit texts, the less anthropomorphic concept of Brahman developed. Brahman isn't a god so much as the all-encompassing essence of reality, the supreme cosmic spirit.

Pretty cool, right Thoth? It's not something you can easily represent on a sandstone relief, but then again it's not that dissimilar from "god" in monotheistic religious traditions. Brahman has sometimes been translated as the "world soul" and all individual souls are one with it.

Don't get too comfortable, though, because Brahman, in later classical Hindu mythology and religion, is embodied and personified as three deities: Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the destroyer. They are all distinct, with their own stories, and yet also represent aspects of the more esoteric and universal idea of Brahman.

This triumvirate? Trifecta? Divine Hat Trick? Hindus call it the Trimurti and Vishnu and Shiva loom largest in Indian myths.

So then, why is Brahma third banana? Well, once the universe is created, the work of the creator is done. True, the concept of cyclical existence is central to the Hindu and Buddhist worldview, so you'd think a creator would be considered among the most important gods.

Still, Brahma's significance declined in comparison with that of Vishnu and Shiva, perhaps because, according to John Brockington, "Essentially he is a fusion of a creator deity with the impersonal Brahman propounded in the Upanishads, which see the goal of religious endeavor as some kind of union with the absolute, whereas the popular forms of religion attested to in the epics prefer a more personal and devotional approach." In other words, Brahma doesn't really get involved in the juicy stuff - battles and quests and adultery.

So let's turn to Vishnu, the preserver. Stories of Vishnu often involve his consort Shri, also called Lakshmi, a goddess of prosperity and good fortune, which is pretty terrific as far as dowries go. Vishnu protects the world from evil, and he often appears in different forms called avatars. Avatars are the human or animal form of a god on earth and they are very, very rad.

By the classical period, Vishnu had ten or so avatars. Matsya, the fish, who we'll hear more about when we talk about floods, Kurma, the tortoise, who played a role similar to the tortoise in the earth diver myth that we saw, Varaha, the boar who is a boar and does boar stuff, Narasimha the man-lion who kills the demon Hiranyakashipu, Vamana, the dwarf who defeats the demon Bai through trickery, Parashurama who kills the hundred-armed Arjuna with an ax and probably has amazing biceps, Rama and Krishna,

who are central to the Mahabaratha, one of the great Sanskrit epics, The Buddha who is the Buddha. You know. From Buddhism. Kalkin who is a future avatar and a millennial figure that will establish a new era. But not like, a millennial-millennial. Kalkin is not on Snapchat.

Shiva, the destroyer, had his origins in the Vedic era as a storm god who was a "wrathful avenger" and a "herdsman of souls," which definitely sounds trickier than sheep. Shiva is also associated with yoga, asceticism, and erotic love. Which definitely sounds contradictory. Or maybe just flexible.

This erotic aspect manifests most concretely in Shiva's symbolic form as a linga, which is self-explanatory if you look at it, and might explain why Shiva has numerous female deities as either wives or consorts, including Sati and Parvati, and sometimes Durga and Kali. Basically, Shiva got game.

One of the best known images of Shiva is his depiction as Nataraga, the lord of the dance - no, definitely not, yes. According to one scholar: "His steps are intended to relieve by enlightenment the suffrage of his devotees: hence he balances on the back of a dwarf who symbolizes ignorance. His gestures and the attributes he is holding symbolize aspects of his divinity; the drum in his back right hand symbolizes creation, the tongue of flame in his back left hand symbolizes destruction, the gesture of protection of his front right hand symbolizes protection and his raised leg symbolizes release." Has Michael Flatley ever balanced on the back of a dwarf? I rest my case.

Now we've spent most of the episode discussing the three key gods of the Trimurti and their amazing dance moves, but Indian pantheons feature goddesses, too, who usually have qualities that complement their husband's powers. I mentioned Parvati and Uma and Sati, the wives of Shiva, and Laskshmi, who is married to Vishnu.

But other traditions describe the goddess Devi, which translates to goddess or Mahadevi, the great goddess, who is occasionally associated with these other consorts, and sometimes seen as a world creator in her own right. In some traditions Devi is essentially the same as Brahman. Like many of the deities we discuss, Devi can be many things to many people.

We haven't seen too many female warrior goddesses yet. So let's wrap up with a story that features one: Durga, also known as Kali, who is unapproachable to her suitors and invincible in battle. Also she rides a lion. So clearly - no one is cool enough to date her.

Thought Bubble, do your thing.

One of the main stories about Durga is that of her killing the buffalo demon Mahisha. Mahisha conquered the other lesser gods, the Devas, and then the Devas went to Vishnu and Shiva for help, who listened and grew angry. And you wouldn't like Vishnu and Shiva when they're angry, because their anger takes the form of Durga, who confronted Mahisha and the other demons.

"The demons rushed towards the goddess who killed them in hundreds, felling some with her club, catching others in her noose, slicing others with her sword, and piercing others with her trident. Meanwhile, Mahisha himself, in buffalo form, terrorized her troops. Then he attacked her lion, and Durga became furious. She caught him in her noose, whereupon he quitted his buffalo shape and became a lion himself. She cut off its head and he emerged as a man, sword in hand.

"As she pierced the man, he became a great elephant, seizing her lion with its trunk, but she cut off his trunk with her sword as he resumed his buffalo form. Lightly tossing aside the mountains he hurled at her, she leaped on him, pinned his neck with one foot and pierced him with her trident. Then she cut off his head with her mighty sword."

Thanks, Thought Bubble. That was... harrowing? I guess it's always the second beheading that sticks?

This episode could only scratch the surface of the complexity of Indian mythology. Not only does it come from so many sources, but for many people these are living myths, unlike the deeds of Egyptian gods that we saw last week. These stories are complex because people associate one god with one or two attributes or phenomena, like wisdom or storms. And these gods take many forms and are often seen as versions of each other, or maybe of a single universal god. Hinduism is a fascinating religion and a rich source of myths, but it's also quite the web...emoji.

Thanks for watching. We'll see you next week.

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Thanks for watching, and don't forget to be mythological. Oh, we punted that one, huh?