

Families of Deities

To enter the Hindu pantheon of gods, goddesses, and other powerful beings for the first time is much like an Indian bride marrying into a large extended family and being introduced to the relatives. Gradually, the bride learns which relatives she will encounter every day and whom she will see only once or twice a year at festivals or weddings, who her immediate neighbors are, and who will be her allies in her new home. While family networks are large and sometimes complicated, there is a core of relatives and neighbors whom the new bride gets to know rather quickly, followed by concentric circles of relatives who are significant, but not part of her daily life. Similarly, there is a family of deities with whom a Hindu interacts regularly in domestic worship, deities she/he may seek out in local temple visits, deities she/he may encounter only periodically (or maybe even a single time) – on pilgrimage, during festivals, and/or as a result of illness or a vow taken for a specific cause – and still others she/he may know narratively, but whom she/he does not

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encounter ritually. This chapter will introduce some of these deities and some of the ways in which they relate one to the other to create “families”; and in the process, the chapter will display the polytheistic imagination and rich narrative worlds that characterize Hindu traditions.

The “families of deities” with whom Hindus interact may be created through literal or figurative kinship or they may be created ritually or narratively. Certain families of deities are identified with particular regions and/or are related through pilgrimage routes; other families are created through domestic or temple worship. To introduce the pantheon of deities that populates Hindu worlds, we start with conceptual and narrative families and then move to families of deities created through ritual practices. The deities described below may be found in the domestic shrines described at the end of this chapter and in temples, rituals, and festivals described in following chapters; many may also be encountered by readers of this book in museums and Hindu homes. However, given the expansive pantheon of deities in Hindu traditions, the families of deities described below are necessarily selective.

Most of the stories of gods and goddesses related in this chapter can be found in the *puranas*, a class of texts from which is derived most Hindu mythology known by contemporary Hindus. There are 18 “major” Sanskrit *puranas*, 18 “sub-major” ones, and a multitude of oral regional-language traditions also called *puranas*, including caste *puranas* that tell the story of how a particular caste came into existence and why that caste plays the occupational and/or ritual role that it does. The *puranas* tell the stories of gods and goddesses, demons, and human devotees, and the creation and dissolution of the world. For example, the acts of Krishna are narrated in the Bhagavata Purana; the creation of and acts of the goddess (Devi) in the Devi Mahatmya section of the Markandeya Purana; and many stories of Shiva in the Shiva Purana. *Sthala puranas* (lit., *puranas* about place) include narratives about the power of particular sacred places, the rituals that should be performed at those places, and the benefits the worshipper will derive from these rituals. I have not provided textual references for most of the narratives below since they circulate orally

and are often not readily identified by either their narrators or audiences with a particular *purana*, and their oral performances may vary considerably from the textual, Sanskrit *puranas*.

The Trimurti

One conceptual family of deities is the Trimurti (lit., three forms): Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva – identified in this configuration as the creator, preserver, and destroyer/transformer of the universe, respectively. The three deities are not traditionally worshipped together in this form; rather, the Trimurti is a concept within which the primary forces of life are identified: creation, sustenance, and death. I have heard many Hindus in the United States begin their explanations of the Hindu pantheon of deities, or even individual deities, to non-Hindus with the Trimurti, as a way to “make sense” for their audiences of the multiplicity characteristic of the pantheon. In contemporary Hindu practices, however, Brahma has lost his equal footing with Shiva and Vishnu; and the ritually significant triad is Shiva, Vishnu, and the goddess (Devi).

While Brahma images can be found on temple exteriors and he remains active in mythology as the deity from whose mouth the four Vedas emerge and as a bestower of boons, there are only a few temples in contemporary India dedicated to this god.¹ Several stories circulate about why Brahma is no longer popularly worshipped. One describes Brahma and Vishnu both trying to find the end of Shiva’s *linga* (Shiva’s aniconic form), the end of which no one could see. Brahma came back from his search saying he had found the end; Vishnu admitted that he had been unable to do so. However, Shiva knew Brahma was lying and declared a curse that Brahma would no longer be worshipped. Brahma’s consort, on the other hand (who does not appear with him in the Trimurti configu-

¹ Two known Brahma temples are in the towns of Pushkar (Rajasthan) and Kumbhakonam (Tamil Nadu).

ration), Sarasvati – goddess of speech, language, and the arts – is actively worshipped by contemporary Hindus throughout India, particularly students. Shiva and Vishnu will appear in descriptions and narratives that follow below.

Mythological and Narrative Families

Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi (the goddess) all have multiple forms and narratives. The goddess appears both as consort of male deities and independently without a male consort. Their mythological families also include the deities' offspring and the animal mounts (*vahanas*) with which they are associated.

Vishnu

Vishnu appears narratively and iconographically in both cosmic form and as a series of incarnations (*avatars*, lit., descent) who come to earth to restore *dharma* by resolving very particular problems (often caused by demons with particular forms). In his cosmic form of Narayana, Vishnu rests between the cycles (*yugas*) of the universe upon an ocean of milk; he lies upon the serpent Sesha, whose multiple hoods shade him; his wife Lakshmi is depicted massaging his feet. This reclining Vishnu is sometimes portrayed with Brahma – who will actually *enact* the creation that Vishnu imagines – seated on a lotus that emerges from his navel. Vishnu is commonly experienced by Hindus in India and the Hindu diaspora – on an everyday basis, ritually – as the god who takes *avatars*, rather than in his cosmic form.

The Dasa Avatars, Manifestations of Vishnu: Vishnu has taken nine *avatars*, with the tenth still to come, to battle against those who threaten the *dharma* of the world; together these ten are known as the *dasa avatars*. (Note that *avatara* is also a more expansive category that includes manifestations of Vishnu outside of the *dasa avatars*; see Chapter 4 for a geographically local *avatara* of Vishnu.) Members of this *dasa avatara* conceptual family are not



Figure 1.1 Vishnu lying on the cosmic ocean, Northern Madhya Pradesh, 11th century CE (31.5 × 44 inches). Courtesy of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University. Photo by Bruce M. White, 2007.

traditionally worshipped together as a unit (that is, they are not a *ritual* family); however, they are frequently visualized together in artistic forms. The listings of the *dasa avatars* shift between different texts, particularly with the inclusion or not of Balarama and Buddha; but one common *puranic* and visually portrayed listing is as follows.

In the first of the four *yugas* – cycles of the universe that descend in length and quality of *dharma* observance by humans – the Satyayuga (lit., age of truth), Vishnu appeared as:

Matsya, the fish who saved the earth from a cataclysmic flood.

Kurma, the tortoise upon whose back the churning stick was placed in the narrative of the “churning of the ocean,” in which the gods and anti-gods (*asuras*) churned up from the ocean bottom the elixir of immortality (*amrita*).

Varaha, the boar who defeated a demon who had rolled up the earth like a mat and carried it to the bottom of the cosmic ocean; Varaha brought up the earth on his tusks.

Narasimha, the half-man/half-lion, who defeated a demon who had been granted a boon that he would not be killed by man or god, could not be killed by any weapon, on earth or in space, at day or night, indoors or outdoors. Narasimha circumvented the boon by appearing as a man-lion, grabbing the demon at twilight, on a threshold, and tearing him open with his nails.

In the second *yuga*, *Tretayuga*, Vishnu appeared as:

Vamana, the dwarf who defeated the *asura* king Bali by asking for, and being granted, as much land as Vamana could cover in three steps. Much to Bali's surprise, the dwarf's first step covered the heavens, his second step covered the earth, and there was no room for the third step. At this point, Bali realized Vamana was Vishnu and offered his own head as the site of the third step.

Parusharama, Rama with the axe, the son of an ascetic who owned the gift-giving magical cow Kamadhenu. Parusharama defeated a king who sent his armies to the ascetic's *ashram* (hermitage) to steal Kamadhenu.

Rama, hero of the epic of the Ramayana, born into a royal family, who killed the ten-headed demon Ravana. (See Chapter 2 for a longer version of the story).

In the third *yuga*, *Dwaparayuga*, Vishnu appeared as:

Krishna, who came to destroy the evil king Kamsa (see below for further narratives).

Finally, in the *Kaliyuga*, the age in which we now live, Vishnu appeared as:

Buddha, who is sometimes included in the *dasa avatara* as a teacher who intentionally misguided the wicked by teaching them wrong religion, thus keeping them at distance from and unthreatening to the truth. But there are also instances in which he is described as

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one who taught nonviolence and compassion and is thus interpreted positively.

Kalki is the tenth *avatara* who is yet to come, riding on a white horse; he will destroy *adharma* (lit., that which is not in accordance with *dharma*), and restore *dharma* to begin a new cycle of the four *yugas*, starting again with the Satyayuga.

Of Vishnu's ten *avatars*, Rama and Krishna are the most commonly worshipped throughout India; Narasimha is also popular in parts of South and Central India. In temples and home shrines, Rama is worshipped with his wife Sita, brother Lakshmana, and the monkey-form deity Hanuman, Rama's devotee and helpmate in the Ramayana (see Chapter 2). Hanuman, on the other hand, often appears alone in temples or roadside shrines, without a narrative family; in this form he often appears covered with bright orange vermilion (*sindhur*).

Krishna: Krishna is worshipped as a toddler (Bala Krishna), a young boy, the cowherd lover Gopala with his beloved Radha, and the prince/charioteer in the Mahabharata. As a toddler, Krishna is loved for his "naughty" antics, including stealing butter from the cowherd families among whom he lives. Another favorite story narrates an incident when Bala Krishna put dirt into his mouth, as toddlers are wont to do. When his mother opens his mouth to take out the dirt, she sees the entire world and (for a moment) realizes that her child is god. As a young man, Krishna as cowherder draws the women of his village to a clearing in the jungle with the beautiful call of his flute and engages in erotic play with them.

Krishna is also the charioteer for the warrior Arjuna in the epic narrative of the Mahabharata. As Arjuna prepares for battle against his cousins (in a fight for inheritance of the throne) and gazes across the battlefield, he loses courage – they are his brothers, after all. And Krishna then gives the teaching that is known as the Bhagavad Gita, in which he urges Arjuna to fulfill the *dharma* of a warrior – that is, to engage in battle – but not to be attached to the results of that action. Arjuna asks Krishna to show his full self,

realizing that he is more than a charioteer. Krishna's theophany reveals a cosmic deity encompassing the entire universe. As is common in many myths, the vision of the full power of the god in his cosmic form is too much to sustain, and Arjuna begs the god to return to his form of charioteer, with whom he can relate more easily. Through Krishna's various personae, we learn that human devotees may relate to and love god as a mother does her child, as a lover, and as a friend.

Shiva

Shiva appears in pan-Indian mythologies as well as in many very local stories where he appears with local names, in which he often takes disguise to test his devotees. In contemporary lithographs, he is often visualized as sitting in the Himalayas – a bare-chested ascetic with a tiger skin wrapped around him and a snake across his chest – with his wife Parvati (daughter of Himalaya). Or he may be shown to be seated in the Himalayas with River Ganga (sometimes identified as one of his two wives) flowing through his locks of hair, which break the impact of the river and keep the earth from being destroyed by the deluge. He is both an ascetic who retreats to the Himalayas for long periods of meditation, and a husband (albeit one whose father-in-law doesn't appreciate his ascetic dress and practices) who plays dice and engages in dance competitions with his wife Parvati. Shiva's *vahana* is Nandi the bull, who often appears with the god in lithograph and sculptural representations. In Shiva temples, Nandi sits outside the *garbagriha* (inner shrine room), facing the god.

Shiva as also known as the King of Dance, Nataraja, who has become the patron god of contemporary classical Indian dance. He dances in the cremation grounds, at the end of creation, and in the pine forest where he reveals his true self only when he begins to dance – both terrifying and enthralling his audience (see Chapter 4 for a fuller telling of this story).

In the inner shrine rooms of Shiva temples and roadside shrines, the god takes form as an aniconic black-stone *linga* (lit., the sign of

Shiva).² While the form is phallic (and there are several myths explicitly identifying it as such),³ the *linga* is equated by its worshippers with the god himself, without any phallic connotations – and thus to speak explicitly of this association understandably offends some Hindus. The *linga* sits in a female womb shape, the *yonis*; together, they embody the generative, creative potentiality of the male and female. One of Shiva's remarkable forms is Ardhanarishvara, who is, quite literally, "the lord who is half man-half woman."

Ganesha: The most popular member of Shiva's family, found in a majority of *brahminic* temples and many domestic altars, is Ganesha, the elephant-headed deity who removes obstacles. (See Chapter 5 for photographs of his festival, Ganesha Chaturthi.) He is worshipped by Hindus before they set out on a new venture or journey, at housewarmings, before exams, or before worship of other deities – whenever the path ahead should be cleared of obstacles. Ganesha's *vahana* is the mouse. One widely told story about how Ganesha came to have an elephant head (and there are other variants) begins with his parents dwelling in the Himalayas.

Shiva has gone out to the mountains to meditate, leaving his wife Parvati behind. She's lonely and creates a son out of a paste of turmeric and ground lentils (a kind of body scrub) that she had rubbed on her body during her bath. One day, while she is taking her bath, Parvati tells her son to stand guard outside the door and not to let anyone in. Shiva returns from his ascetic retreat and is blocked from entering his home by a "stranger." He demands to be let in, but Ganesha refuses; and in anger, Shiva beheads him. Only when Parvati comes out of her bath, devastated by what she sees in front of her, does Shiva

² The only temple in which Shiva's central temple image is not a *linga* is in Cidambaram, Tamil Nadu, where the god is said to appear every evening to perform his *anandatandava* dance – and the central image in this temple is Nataraja; see Chapter 4 for a discussion of the *sthala purana* of this temple site.

³ See Don Handelman and David Shulman, *Shiva and the Pine Forest* (2004).

learn whom he has beheaded. He sends his attendants out to the jungle to bring back the head of the first living thing they encounter, which happens to be an elephant.⁴ Shiva attaches that head and Ganesha comes to life again and is worshipped in the form of an elephant-headed, human-bodied deity.

Kartikeya, Murugan: In Tamil Nadu and Tamilian diasporic communities, the brother of Ganesha – variously named Skanda, Murugan, Kartikeya, or Subrahmanya – is particularly popular; his *vahana* is the peacock. One narrative regarding the two brothers, Ganesha and Kartikeya, tells of a competition between the two to obtain the prize of knowledge from the sage Narada. The competition was a race around the world; Kartikeya was at a distinct advantage due to his peacock *vahana* and Ganesha's slower mouse *vahana* and considerable girth. Kartikeya raced off to his journey around the world, only to find upon his return Ganesha was already standing there. Ganesha had simply circumambulated his parents (Shiva and Parvati) three times, as parents are considered to be one's entire world; and Ganesha won the prize of knowledge.

⁴ Another variant of this narrative, told on Ganesha Chaturthi in Telugu-speaking communities, expands on the reason for Ganesha's elephant head: a demon named Gajasura, who had traits of an elephant, once performed austerities to the god Shiva. Shiva appeared before him and promised to grant whatever wish the demon desired if Gajasura would suspend his powerful ascetic practice. Gajasura asked that Shiva reside in the demon's stomach. Shiva was obliged to grant the wish and entered Gajasura's stomach. Noticing Shiva's absence, the other gods went to Vishnu for help. Knowing what had happened, Vishnu took the guise of a cowherd with Shiva's bull Nandi at his side. With the bull, Vishnu performed a traditional cowherd's song and dance in front of the demon. Captivated by the performance, Gajasura vowed to give the cowherd whatever he desired. Vishnu then revealed his true identity and asked that Shiva be released from Gajasura's stomach. Gajasura released Shiva, but made one final request, that his elephant head would always be remembered. So, when Shiva realized he had beheaded Parvati's son, as related above, he asked his attendants to bring back the head of the first animal they encountered in the jungle, which was an elephant. Attaching the elephant head to Ganesha's body fulfilled Shiva's promise to Gajasura that his (elephant) head would always be remembered.

Devi, the Goddess

The multiple manifestations of the goddess are a particularly good example of the Hindu idea of the plurality of singular identity; that is, while all gods are rarely referred to as manifestations of a singular god (*deva*), goddesses are frequently associated with a singular Devi. This concept is performed during the annual festival of Navaratri (Nine Nights of the Goddess), during which the goddess is celebrated with a different form and name each of the nine nights, and yet all are considered to be one, Devi. The goddess sometimes appears as a consort to Shiva, Vishnu, or Brahma (Parvati, Lakshmi, and Sarasvati, respectively), and at other times independently (even if she is narratively a consort, such as Sarasvati). Many other goddesses such as Durga and the *gramadevata* Seven Sisters have no consorts either narratively or in visual representations.

Durga: One of the most well-known narratives and images of the goddess is that of Durga and the demon Mahishasura. Like the demons Vishnu comes in *avatara* form to destroy, here, too, a demon has acquired powers through his meditation that ultimately threaten the *dharmic* order of the world. Mahishasura was granted the boon of not being able to be killed by any man or god; but he had not considered the possibility of being killed by a woman and had not, therefore, asked for this exemption. So the gods, including Vishnu and Shiva, create the goddess Durga out of their *tejas* (energy) and give her their weapons. After his generals have been destroyed by Durga, the demon tries to elude the goddess by turning himself into a buffalo. But Durga catches and beheads him; this scene is often portrayed in sculptures and paintings, usually depicting the demon in his original (human-bodied) form emerging from the buffalo at that moment of the latter's death.

The festival of Durga Puja – particularly popular in Bengal, but also widely celebrated in North India – celebrates Durga's battle and victory over Mahishasura.⁵ During the ten days of this festival, temporary shrines (*pandals*) are erected to house clay or

⁵ I was told by a village headman in the fall of 2014 on a return trip to Chhattisgarh that Durga Puja has become more and more popular in many villages in the region



Figure 1.2 Durga battling the buffalo demon, Rajasthan, ca. 900 CE (45 × 25 inches) Courtesy of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University. Photo by Bruce M. White, 2007.

plaster-of-paris images of the goddess, which are immersed in bodies of water at the end of the festival.

Lakshmi: Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and auspiciousness, is the consort of Vishnu and is often shown by his side in temple iconography; but she also appears independently (particularly

that traditionally did not celebrate the festival. He said with some regret that, with the ubiquitous presence of television, village audiences were no longer interested in sitting through 10 days of Ramayana dramatic performances during the Dashera festival, and that Durga Puja had become more popular.

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in lithographs), when she is seated on a lotus, flanked by two auspicious elephants, with gold coins flowing down from one of her hands. Lakshmi's qualities and the multiple forms of wealth she embodies and bestows are conceptualized through the configuration of the *ashta lakshmis* (eight Lakshmis), who are named:

Adi Lakshmi, she who has existed from the beginning of time;
Saubhagya Lakshmi, she who is and gives auspiciousness;
Dhana Lakshmi, she who is and gives wealth;
Dhairya Lakshmi, she who is and gives courage;
Vijaya Lakshmi, she who is and gives victory and success;
Vidya Lakshmi, she who is and gives knowledge;
Dhanya Lakshmi, she who brings fertility to the earth and takes the form of grain;
Santana Lakshmi, she who bestows children.

The *ashta lakshmis* appear in some goddess temples in a row of eight *murtis* along the side of a wall, but rarely in the inner *garbagriha* shrine room.

Gramadevatas, Village Deities

Shiva, Vishnu, and Devi appear throughout India and the Hindu diaspora, although they may take local names and have local narratives. In contrast, *gramadevatas* (lit., village deities) are tied to particular geographic places, the land itself, and rarely immigrate with diasporic communities.

Gramadevatas traditionally dwell on village boundaries in open-air shrines or under trees; however, urban neighborhoods have grown up around many of them, where their open-air shrines have become more fully established shrines or permanent temples. In South India the most common *gramadevatas* are the Seven Sisters, who guard village welfare, protect humans from disease (particularly poxes, rashes, and fevers associated with the hot season), and ensure the fertility and health of crops and animals. The Sisters are

an expansive and shifting family, whose individual names may vary from village to village, town to town. Sometimes individual sisters are associated with specific illnesses (distinguishing between mumps, measles, chickenpox, and diarrhea, for example), and at other times they are conflated and associated more generally with the entire class of illnesses. Some of their common names are Yellamma, Mariamma, Gangamma, Mutyalamma, and Ankamma. Whatever their names, they appear in their individual temples or shrines with their brother Potu Raju (in the form of an uncarved rock or cement pillar marked with turmeric and vermilion powder) facing them, standing guard.

The Seven Sisters are unmarried, but they often wear the gold pendant associated with marriage, and some – such as Gangamma in Tirupati, South India – have children.⁶ When, in 1991, I asked the flower sellers at Gangamma's largest Tirupati temple who her husband was, given that she was wearing a wedding pendant (*tali*), they first answered she has no husband; however, ten years later – presumably under influence of a growing middle-class ideology of gender and sexuality that “requires” a husband if there are children – they responded that her husband must be Shiva. However, he is not visible iconographically in the temples nor does he appear as husband in Gangamma's oral narratives. The Sisters are rarely brought into domestic worship spaces because their needs (including, traditionally, animal sacrifice) are too many to be fulfilled by individual householders; rather, they are most often worshipped at their public shrines or temples.

Although individual Sisters may be found in multiple places, each place has a unique story of the goddess's presence and power at “this place.” As an example of the ways in which *gramadevatas* are tied to a specific place, I give a synopsis of the story of Gangamma in the South Indian pilgrimage town of Tirupati and the nearby village of Avilala.

⁶ Amy L. Allocco reports that, similarly, a (traditionally) unmarried snake goddess (*nagamman*) in Chennai is annually offered the pregnancy bangle ritual (*simantam*), although it is not clear that there is a husband or even a pregnancy.

As a little baby, Gangamma was found abandoned in a dry paddy field, from where she was taken in as a daughter by a Reddy-caste family, in the village of Avilala. There was a particularly powerful Palegadu (landowner) who used to demand sexual access to (sometimes marriage with) the beautiful virgins living in his domain. When his glance fell on a pubescent Gangamma as she was drying her hair on her rooftop, he desired her and approached her parents with his intention to marry her. Not knowing their daughter was the goddess, they were afraid and tried to resist his overtures. But Gangamma assured them they should assent; she would take care of herself. As the couple (Gangamma and the Palegadu) was circumambulating the sacred fire in the final marriage rite, Gangamma turned around to face the Palegadu and showed him her true self, stretching from earth to sky. Petrified, he ran away to Tirupati. She chased him for six days, taking a series of guises (those of milkmaid, ascetic, snake charmer, shepherd, sweeper, etc.) to disguise herself so that the Palegadu wouldn't see her before she saw him. Finally, hearing people praise Gangamma in her guise as a prince, the Palegadu came out of hiding to see who was competing with him for such praise; and Gangamma beheaded him. After killing the Palegadu, Gangamma wandered the village (*uru*), showing herself in her true form for the duration of what is now her annual festival. At the end of the festival (and its narrative), Gangamma departs from Tirupati, "over the seven seas." (See Flueckiger 2013 for other Gangamma narratives and their gendered variations.)

While narratively the goddess leaves Tirupati, *ritually* she stays and is served throughout the year and during her annual festival (see Chapter 5 for a fuller description of the festival). Gangamma is referred to as a daughter of *this* place, whom ancestors of the Avilala and Tirupati residents themselves knew, and who protects *this* village or neighborhood and its environs; she does not emigrate

from the lands to which she is so closely tied, and does not accompany those of her worshippers who do so.

Shitala Mata (lit., the Cool Mother) is the North Indian goddess whose role as protector from illness approximates that of the Seven Sisters in the South; but like the Seven Sisters, Shitala, too, takes on much wider identities than that of “disease goddess.” In Central India, a common village guardian is the male deity Thakur Dev, who has a protective ritual role, but no extensive narrative. He has traditionally appeared as a stone slab or a wooden post on village boundaries or guarding paddy fields; however, during a 2014 return trip to Chhattisgarh, I noticed something very new – an anthropomorphic form of Thakur Dev riding a horse (see Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3 New image of Thakur Dev in village paddy fields, Chhattisgarh.

I was told that this form of Thakur Dev had begun to replace non-anthropomorphic forms only in the last two years. In Rajasthan, family and village guardians are often Sati Matas, women-become-goddesses who have committed *sati* (an act of self-immolation upon the death of their husbands), which signals their devotion, truthfulness, and resulting spiritual power.

Gramadevatas are often portrayed in academic writings as living in discrete narrative and ritual worlds from those of *puranic* deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi, and Durga. However, many Hindu devotees live with and serve both *gramadevatas* and *puranic* deities as *integrated* rather than discrete pantheons. Sometimes local *gramadevatas* are said to be in familial relationships with *puranic* deities. For example, the *puranic* deity Venkateshvara (whose temple is the destination of pilgrimage to Tirupati) is understood by Tirupati residents to be a brother of the *gramadevata* Gangamma; and he sends (atop a royal elephant) traditional bridal gifts of a sari and *pasupu-kumkum* (turmeric-vermilion) to his sister on the first day of her annual festival.

The association between the *puranic* god and *gramadevata* goddess is also performed on the domestic *puja* shelves – where both Venkateshvara and Gangamma have been installed and are worshipped daily – of the families who are key ritual actors in Gangamma’s festival. One of these families, the Kaikalas, has the *mirasi* (right and responsibility) both to take the perambulating guises of Gangamma during her festival *and* to unlock the temple of Venkateshvara’s brother, Govinda Raja Swamy, every morning. This family of ritual specialists performs its duties for both Gangamma and Venkateshvara’s brother as integrated ritual responsibilities.

Temple Families

While various myths may bring different deities together in one story – such as Vishnu who watches Shiva dance, or the goddess Adi Para Shakti who creates the three gods (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva) in search of a husband – temples are generally dedicated to a single deity – for example, a form of Shiva, Vishnu, or the goddess – and

his/her associated family members.⁷ Each temple has a local name for the primary deity and a local story of how the deity came to take residence there (the *sthala purana*: the story of the place; see Chapter 4). Shiva is often named the lord (*ishvara* or *natha*) of a particular place. For example, in Kalahasti he is Kalahastishvara; in Varanasi, Vishvanatha; in Madurai, Shiva and Parvati are called Sundeshvara and Minakshi. Vishnu comes to Tirupati as Venkateshvara, whose wife is locally known as Padmavati or Alumelamanga; in Sri Ranganam, Vishnu is Ranganatha. These local names identify the god/goddess with specific local landscapes, which makes them more accessible and locally meaningful to residents of “that place.”

The first temples built in the United States often housed a wide array of deities, who appeared with equal importance (size and placement), given that there were not enough Hindus in a given American city from any single sectarian affiliation (Shaiva, Vaishnava, or Shakta [goddess]) or from a specific region in India to be able to support temples dedicated to a single deity. For example, one of the first temple spaces built in Atlanta was in the Indian American Cultural Association building (inaugurated in 1984).⁸ An altar is located on one end of the carpeted, rectangular room on which a large ritual family of deities has been installed, including white-marble (characteristic of North Indian images), similarly sized, styled, and dressed images of Ganesha, Shiva, Durga, Parvati, Rama, Sita, Hanuman, Krishna, and Radha, as well as a smaller brass image of the Jain *tirthankara* (enlightened teacher) Mahavira, and a black-stone Shiva *linga* in front of them all. This rather unusual ritual-temple family of deities – while rarely found in India – has a democratic appeal here in the United States, with no single deity given precedence over another by size or style, except for perhaps the slightly larger Ganesha, who appears in the center. However, as more and more Hindus immigrated to the Atlanta metropolitan area, regionally styled and sectarian temples began to be

⁷ There are important exceptions; for example, in Cidambaram, Shiva as Nataraja is the primary deity, but in a shrine close to the *garbagriha* is another shrine housing a large image of Vishnu lying on the ocean of milk.

⁸ Each major Indian religious tradition (including Christianity and Islam) was offered a worship room, but only Hindus and Jains took up this offer.

built, including the South Indian Hindu Temple of Atlanta dedicated to Vishnu as Sri Venkateshwara and a newer temple on the same site to Shiva and Parvati as Ramalingeshwara and Parvathavardhani, respectively; the Gujarati Shakti Mandir to the goddess; the North Indian Shiv Mandir of Atlanta; the North America Shirdi Sai Baba Temple; the Gujarati Swaminarayan (BAPS)⁹ temple; and the North Indian Hanuman Mandir.

Ritual Families in Domestic Shrines

Most Hindu domestic shrines display three-dimensional images (*murtis*) and/or lithograph representations of the deities whom family members worship on a daily basis. These sometimes crowded altars may be a single wooden shelf or small niche in the wall, a cabinet in the kitchen, a small moveable “temple” in the corner of a room, or (in wealthier homes) an entire little room set aside for the deities. To “read” these domestic altars of the gods and goddesses helps us to identify a variety of ways in which *devotional* families of deities are created. These ritually created families are more eclectic than are those represented in temples and shrines in India, and may include forms of Shiva, Vishnu, and the goddess, Ganesha, gurus such as Shirdi Sai Baba, and photographs of family ancestors.¹⁰

The basic deities on a domestic *puja* shrine usually include a family deity (*kuladevata*, inherited through patriline), a caste or village deity, and one or more personal deities (*ishtadevatas*, who may be the same as or different from the family deity). Other deities may be added when a family member performs a vow to a particular god or goddess or has gone on pilgrimage to a powerful dwelling of a deity. Domestic shrines can be interpreted as visual, non-linear life stories and reflections of networks of relationships of the families who create and maintain the shrines.

⁹ BAPS is an acronym for Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha.

¹⁰ These photographs of ancestors are not usually kept on the same shelf as the deities, but may be on a different shelf of the *puja* shrine or outside of, but near, it.

We shift now to an examination of three specific domestic *puja* shrines that illustrate the ways in which families of deities are created in these shrines.

Domestic shrine of a Hyderabad, Tamil Mudaliar-caste family: The Thangavelus are a Tamil family whose ancestors immigrated to Hyderabad three generations ago. The father, Thanganne, is a retired railway official and the mother, Revathi, is a retired university professor; their two adult children have both spent considerable time in the United States for higher education and employment, but have now both moved back to India. The family's domestic *puja* shrine is a wooden cabinet with four shelves whose glass-fronted doors are left open (see Figure 1.4). It is situated in the western corner (facing the auspicious eastern direction) of the front "hall," or public sitting room, of the home. Revathi told me that they had chosen this location, rather than the kitchen, because they cook non-vegetarian food in the kitchen. In most Hindu homes, one family member, often the matriarch, conducts daily morning worship to the deities of a domestic shrine. In the case of this family, however, Thanganne is now (post-retirement) responsible for daily morning worship (placing a small white flower atop each image, lighting incense and the brass oil lamp, saying some prayers), while Revathi maintains the shrine and its deities by washing them weekly; she also sets up temporary shrines in the home for festivals such as Ganesha Chaturthi and other periodic rituals.

The Thangavelu shrine is particularly eclectic. I asked both Thanganne and Revathi, individually, to explain how each deity had found his/her way to their *puja* shrine. A set of small black-stone deities was inherited from Thanganne's family, including a Ganesha, Shiva in the form of a *linga* and his bull *vahana* Nandi, Vishnu lying on the ocean of milk, and the Tamil poet-saint Andal. On their marriage, Revathi brought in another stone Ganesha and added hers to the patrilineal stone set; her daughter-in-law has added still another stone Ganesha to the set. Revathi explained that the black-stone set of the ritual family of deities will eventually find its place in the domestic shrine of the Thangavelus' son, and their daughter-in-law will carry the responsibility to maintain them.



Figure 1.4 Thangavelu domestic *puja* shrine, Hyderabad.

Joining this black-stone “family” on the same small yellow-painted wooden throne-shelf (*pitha*) are metal images of Gopala Krishna (Krishna as cowherd), Lakshmi, and the Ramayana “family” of Rama, Sita, and Hanuman (see Figure 1.5). A framed photograph of the image of the goddess Draupadi (wife of the five Pandava brothers/heroes of the great epic Mahabharata) as she appears in Thanganne’s ancestral temple in Tamil Nadu also sits on the top shelf of the cabinet.¹¹ Joining Draupadi on the same shelf are brass images of Lakshmi and Sarasvati that Thanganne’s sister added (Revathi elaborated, “Each person adds something”). Behind the

¹¹ Draupadi is worshipped primarily in South India.



Figure 1.5 Close-up of family-inherited ritual family of deities, Hyderabad.

black-stone set of deities hangs a yellow-painted wooden circle, marked with three red horizontal lines and decorated with red and white painted dots; this is the goddess inherited from Thanganne's mother, about which neither Thanganne nor Revathi know much else, but they both felt that they should "keep" this goddess.

Other deities who reside on the second shelf of this domestic shrine have joined the wider ritual family through pilgrimages the Thangavelus have made: Lakshmi from Udipi; Sharada Devi from Sringeri; Shiva from Palaghat. A flat brass *yantra* (intersecting, geometrical triangles) representing the goddess also resides on this shelf. Joining the deities in this cupboard shrine are three framed pictures of family elders who have passed on: Thanganne's parents, his paternal grandparents, and Revathi's parents; a vermilion dot has been placed on the forehead of each elder. Many families keep photographs of their ancestors hanging on walls outside, rather than in, the *puja* shrine; and these photographs are similarly honored with

vermilion markings and often a garland of flowers. In this way, the ancestors are treated like deities; although they do not grant boons, they offer protection to the generations that follow them.

Thanganne often noted the familial connections between the deities: the Shiva *linga* requires the presence of Nandi; Hanuman is found wherever Rama and Sita are found; the roadside goddess shrines scattered throughout Hyderabad are all forms of Durga. Revathi, on the other hand, spoke of the requirements of ritually taking care of the deities. For example, she explained that the yellow wooden circle with three red lines would traditionally have been painted, or applied with turmeric and vermilion, on the wall of the home itself, but maintaining this is a “big job”; and so, she had it painted on a piece of wood. She went on to describe her responsibility of taking all the deities off the shelves and washing them every week, and then carefully putting them back in the particular places that her elders used to do, a ritual that preserves and maintains family ties and traditions through embodied practices.¹²

Domestic shrine of a Brahmin family in suburban Atlanta: Ravi and Sasikala Penumarthi immigrated to Atlanta from Andhra Pradesh in 1991. Ravi is an executive in a software engineering company and Sasikala a renowned Kuchipudi dancer and dance guru. The family’s *puja* shrine (which Sasikala called a *puja mandiram*, lit., *puja* temple) is located in the kitchen, in an east-facing cabinet with glass doors that was specifically constructed for this purpose when they built their house in the Atlanta suburbs. Sasikala explained that she wanted the shrine close to where she prepared the food offered to the deities (rather than in an upstairs bedroom dedicated to this purpose, which is quite common in American Hindu homes), so that it didn’t have to “pass over all kinds of floors and carpets to get to another room,” which may result in the offerings coming into contact with impurities.

Sasikala identified the central deities of the shrine to be Venkateshvara and his two wives Padmavati and Bhu Devi. She explained that these

¹² With the encouragement of her adult children, when they have felt the *puja* shrine is becoming too crowded and it is being reconfigured or moved, Revathi has periodically taken off *murtis* that are not part of the patrilineal inheritance.

are family deities from both her husband's family and her own father's family. Before they moved to their newly constructed house, these deities had been represented by framed lithographs; but for the new house they purchased the metal images that are now installed. Other deities in the cabinet shrine, and the stated reasons they are present, include: Shiva and Parvati, her mother's side's family deities; the half-woman/half-man Ardhanarishvara form of Shiva, which, she explained, represents the centrality of the "couple"; Durga because her mother used to worship her; Rama, because her mother-in-law "liked him a lot"; Hanuman, because her father had told her that Hanuman gives strength and courage; a small Lakshmi, which was a wedding



Figure 1.6 Penumarthi domestic *puja* shrine, suburban Atlanta.

gift given by an aunt; and an unusual Ganesha made from laminated grains and lentils given to Sasikala by her sister. Prominent on the *puja* shelf is the dancing Nataraja form of Shiva; as Sasikala explained, “Shiva is my main god because of dance. He’s my *ishtadevata*. I first pray to Shiva. Then [I think of] Venkateshvara.” Her husband Ravi, on the other hand, said he thinks of Venkateshvara first.

An unusual framed lithograph of Hanuman with a very long tail marked with a line of vermilion dots leans against the inner side of the main *puja* shelf. Sasikala explained that this form of Hanuman came to reside in the shrine as the result of a particular vow to him that she has performed four times. When Sasikala’s father had lost his job when she was a young girl, a friend had encouraged her mother to perform the vow; and the vow had subsequently become a family tradition. For 41 days (each day marked by a vermilion dot on his tail), the devotee eats only one time a day and recites the Hanuman Chalisa (a short devotional praise text to Hanuman) 11 times. Most recently, Sasikala had vowed to observe these rituals to bring successful fruition to an innovative Kuchipudi dance drama she had choreographed; after the highly successful performance, she fulfilled her vow of fasting and chanting the Chalisa for 41 days.

Sasikala and Ravi share in the responsibilities of service to the deities in their home shrine. Sasikala explained that when one keeps deities in the home, there should always be *prasad* in front of them – minimally, offerings of water and a silver coin. Every Friday, she makes special *prasad* of cooked rice and lentils for the deities and, Friday being a special day for the goddess, recites the Lalitasahasranama (the 1,000 names of the goddess). During the recitation, she places a series of flowers into a silver tray set in front of the goddess. Sasikala has trained her two children to recite Vishnu *suprabhatam* (verses recited to awaken a deity in the morning), which they chant to Venkateshvara before they go to school. Every Saturday, a day special to Venkateshvara, Ravi performs *abhishekam* for the god and his wives, a ritual that involves pouring milk and water over the brass images and reclothing and decorating them with a gold chains and vermilion and turmeric markings.

Sasikala explained the differences between worshipping a deity at home and in a temple: the temple is more powerful because the images are larger, they are worshipped by priests throughout the day (rather than only once a day at home), and there are no distractions of daily life all around you like there are at home. However, she knows some friends who think the home *puja* is more powerful, in part because of the intimate contact householders can have with these deities (feeding and dressing them) without a priest serving as an intermediary (as is the case in *puranic*-deity temples); and certainly, Sasikala affirms, every Hindu home *should* have a *puja* shrine of some kind.

Domestic shrine in rural Chhattisgarh: Many domestic shrines are much simpler than the two described above; they may be a simple wall shelf or a few framed and garlanded lithographs of deities hung above a doorway. Even if rural families are wealthy enough to purchase metal *murtis*, they often have only a few small ones and rely on lithographs for representations of their deities. One village domestic shrine of a Chhattisgarhi Kolta-caste, wealthy farming family consists of two simple stone shelves built into a brick wall of the interior of the house. When I asked if I could see their *puja* shelf, the female householder took me into a darkened room with no electricity, and only with my camera flash could I identify who was there. The top shelf held three large framed lithographs of Ganesha, Hanuman, and Lakshmi, all garlanded with a single string of pink plastic flowers. In front of them were smaller lithographs of Shirdi Sai Baba, Durga sitting atop her tiger, and a lithograph brought back from the pilgrimage site of Narsinghnath (see Chapter 4). The shelf below held three small brass images of Lakshmi, each wrapped with pink cloth, a lithograph of Narasimha, and ritual implements including a conch shell and small brass water vessel; several incense sticks lay in front of them.

Domestic *puja* shrines reveal the religious, regional, and personal networks within which particular families and individuals live. They are often crowded and even “messy” with ritual remains (such as vermilion and turmeric powder); they are constantly shifting, with the addition of deities with whom a worshipper may have had an encounter at a pilgrimage site or through a particular vow; and



Figure 1.7 Rural *puja* shelf, Chhattisgarh.

they reflect and help to create relationships between worshippers and particular deities, as well as materially embodying family relationships and histories.

Ritual and narrative families of Hindu deities are both expansive and context-specific. Hindus do not live on a daily basis with the fullest possible pantheon of deities, or even all of those they have come to know narratively. They worship family and personal deities on a daily basis, may participate in rituals at the homes of friends whose *puja* shelves house another set of deities, and they may visit temples of still other deities weekly or on periodic pilgrimages.

With all this diversity, there also coexists for some Hindus the concept of the singular *brahman*, ultimate reality that has no shape, form, or mythology, that exists beyond the created world. And it is to this

concept that Hindus are referring when they say, for example, “God is one,” or “There are many forms and names of god, but there is only one.” But “god” here is not the theistic reality that the term implies in English; rather, it is an Upanishadic concept developed by Vedantic philosophers who argue that reality is singular: the created and non-created worlds – and *brahman* is that singular identity that cannot be known except by yogis who follow strict discipline and practice. Thus, when a Hindu says “God is one,” this is very different from a Muslim, Christian, or Jew who may say, “There is only one god.”

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