

Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism

HANDBOOK OF ORIENTAL STUDIES
HANDBUCH DER ORIENTALISTIK

SECTION TWO
INDIA

edited by

J. Bronkhorst
A. Malinar

VOLUME 22/6

Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism

Volume VI:
Index

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BRILL

LEIDEN • BOSTON
2015

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brill's encyclopedia of Hinduism / edited by Knut A. Jacobsen (editor-in-chief); associate editors, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, Vasudha Narayanan.

p. cm. — (Handbook of oriental studies. Section three, India, ISSN 0169-9377; v. 22/6)

ISBN 978-90-04-26555-4 (hardback : alk. paper)

1. Hinduism—Encyclopedias. I. Jacobsen, Knut A., 1956- II. Basu, Helene. III. Malinar, Angelika.

IV. Narayanan, Vasudha.

BL1105.B75 2009

294.503—dc22

2009023320

ISSN 0169-9377

ISBN 978 90 04 26555 4

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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Trimūrti

Trimūrti (lit. having three forms) is a conception that posits a supreme deity manifesting itself in three particular shapes in order to perform the basic cosmological functions: as Brahmā he emits the world, as Viṣṇu he preserves it, and as Śiva he annihilates it. The grouping together of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva – albeit not always in this order – and the emphasis on their specific yet complementary roles emerged in the first centuries of the Common Era. This was the result of a theological and cosmological synthesis that was already implied in the *Mahābhārata* and *Harivaṃśa* but reached its fullest expression in the literature of the Purāṇas.

It has been hypothesized that the *trimūrti* concept might have developed under the influence of Mahāyāna Buddhism and its triads: one is reminded of the Buddha's three bodies, that is, the *dharmakāya* (“dharma body,” the unconceivable aspect of the Buddha corresponding to the perfectly pure reality of *nirvāṇa*), *sambhogakāya* (“enjoyment body,” the glorified body that the Buddha attained as a reward for his *bodhisattva* practices), and *nirmāṇakāya* (“apparition body” the Buddha's bodily form), as well as of the emanation of *dhyānibuddhas* (celestial *buddhas* engaged in contemplation), *dhyānibodhisattvas* (celestial *bodhisattvas* engaged in contemplation), and *mānuṣibuddhas* (human *buddhas*) from the supreme Ādibuddha (the original Buddha). Be that as it may, the *trimūrti* of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva is linked to the rise of devotional, *bhakti* movements and to the integration of their supreme deities – mainly Viṣṇu and Śiva – within a cosmological framework combining the outward (*pravṛtti*) and inward (*nivṛtti*) poles, that is, involvement in the world through its manifestation and maintenance and withdrawal from it through its annihilation. This integrative effort was the product of theological speculation, a somewhat artificial attempt that never became popular among the masses, nor did it trigger a specific worship. Even in the Purāṇas, the focus is placed on its individual members rather than on their cooperative ensemble as a triad. Due to sectarian reasons, the one supreme deity that manifests itself in the three forms is identified with a particular god or even a particular goddess (*devī*), that is, with one's chosen deity (*iṣṭadevatā*). This

supreme godhead is often one of the three members of the *trimūrti* itself, typically Viṣṇu or Śiva, who in his transcendent reality is conceived as none other than the absolute *brahman*, utterly detached from the lower cosmological functions of manifestation, preservation, and annihilation.

G. Bailey (1979) has argued that the *trimūrti* concept fits well with the trifunctional Indo-European pattern – he cites *Kathāsaritsāgara* 8.4.46–48 as a revealing passage – even though he underlines that trifunctionalism is not the only or even the most important influence in the characterization of the group of the three gods: Brahmā is understood as the representative of vedic religion and of the Brāhmaṇa *varṇa*; Viṣṇu is said to characterize kingship and the Kṣatriya *varṇa*; and Śiva is linked to the power of fertility and to the Vaiśya *varṇa*.

Historical Development

The first occurrence of the three forms of the *trimūrti* – though not explicitly identified as creator, preserver, and destroyer of the cosmos – is found in three places of the late and composite *Maitrāyaṇīyopaniṣad* (4.5–6; 5.1–2; 6.5). In *Maitrāyaṇīyopaniṣad* 4.5–6, Brahmā, Rudra (= Śiva), and Viṣṇu – in this order – are mentioned together with two other triads (Agni, Vāyu, and Āditya [i.e. fire, air, and sun]; and time, *prāṇa*, and food) as being objects of meditation, the chief bodies of the immortal, disembodied *brahman*. Moreover, *Maitrāyaṇīyopaniṣad* 6.5 states that Agni, Vāyu, and Āditya are *brahman*'s luminous body and that through Brahmā, Rudra, and Viṣṇu, its body has sovereign deities. In particular, 5.1–2 correlates the triad of gods with the three *guṇas* of Sāṃkhya, each god being identified with one particular quality: Rudra with the dark, inert *tamas*, Brahmā with the active, passionate *rajas*, and Viṣṇu with the luminous, pure *sattva*.

The *trimūrti* is not the only nor indeed the earliest triad in Indian literature. From vedic times, there has been a tendency to recognize several triads of divine powers. The above-mentioned triad of Agni, Vāyu (or Indra), and Āditya (or Sūrya) is found in the earliest vedic sources, being related to the assumption that Agni (“Fire”) manifests

himself in three forms: as sun in the sky, as lightning in the atmosphere, and as fire on earth. Even the 33 deities of the vedic pantheon are distinguished into 3 classes of 11 gods supposed to dwell in the 3 regions of space: the celestial *ādityas* in the heavens, the aerial *rudras* in the intermediate atmosphere, and the terrestrial *vasus* on earth (see vedic gods). It seems reasonable to suppose that these vedic triads were influential in the elaboration of the *trimūrti* concept. J. Gonda remarked the following:

The Trimūrti idea of Hinduism seems to have developed from ancient cosmological and ritualistic speculations about the triple character of an individual god, in the first place of Agni, whose births are three or threefold and who is threefold light, has three bodies and three stations, etc. (Gonda, 1968, 218)

In the Brāhmaṇas, even the creator god Prajāpati exhibits a threefold character, being identified with various gods such as Vāyu, Puruṣa, and Agni. The *trimūrti* concept appears to be adumbrated already in the solemn definition of *Taittirīyopaniṣad* 3.1.1, where the transcendent *brahman*, described as triune, is characterized by the three functions of manifestation, maintenance, and dissolution of the world and its creatures: “That from which these beings are born; on which, once born, they live; and into which they pass upon death – seek to perceive that! That is *Brahman!*” (trans. Olivelle, 1998, 190). The *trimūrti* is also linked to the syllable *om*, the three gods being interpreted as its constituent phonemes, that is, *a*, *u*, and *m*. The late *Māṇḍūkyaopaniṣad*, which identifies the *om* with *brahman*, the *ātman*, and the world, and the three phonemes with the waking, dreaming, and deep-sleep states, respectively, states: “He is the Lord of all; he is the knower of all; he is the inner controller; he is the womb of all – for he is the origin and the dissolution of beings” (*MāṇḍU.* 6; trans. Olivelle, 1998, 289).

Traditionally, the triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva is microcosmically equated to the ages of man, that is, childhood, youth, and old age as well as to the stages of life (→ *āśramas*): the student’s celibate life (*brahmacarya*), the householder’s life (*gārhasthya*), and the renouncer’s life (*saṃnyāsa*).

Turning to the epic materials, it must be observed that each of the three cosmological functions is not consistently assigned to the same deity:

for instance, Brahmā is said to act as destroyer as well as preserver, and Viṣṇu is extolled as creator as well as destroyer. If in the *Rāmāyaṇa* there is no mention whatsoever of the *trimūrti*, in the entire *Mahābhārata*, there is only one passage in which the three functions of the triad of gods are openly stated. This is found in the third book of the *Vanaparvan*, regarded as an interpolation by the editors of the BORI critical edition, where Śiva extols Viṣṇu as the supreme god of gods, the primordial principle assuming all forms: “As Brahmā he emits (*śṛjate*) the world, as Puruṣa (i.e. Viṣṇu) he protects (*rakṣate*) it, and as Rudra (= Śiva) he destroys (*śamayet*) it: these are the three states (*tisro’vashāḥ*) of Prajāpati” (*MBh.* 3, app. I, 27, 35–36; trans. by author).

Despite this sole and possibly late reference to the *trimūrti*, the epic poets concern themselves at various points with the theological and cosmological configurations of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva as well as of another triad, namely, that of Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Devī (Mahādevī). Although the intricate mythological network of the *Mahābhārata* tends to establish multiple associations rather than one-to-one correspondences, A. Hildebeitel has persuasively argued that the epic triad of Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, and Draupadī (the so-called three Kṛṣṇas) stands for the *bhakti* triad of Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the Goddess, and that the triad of Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, and Vyāsa is evocative of the three gods of the *trimūrti*, given that Vyāsa exhibits affinities with Brahmā (Hildebeitel, 1984, 5–6).

To be sure, in the *Mahābhārata* there are various episodes in which Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva cooperate in view of a common goal. In the story of the Arjuna-Karṇa duel narrated in the *Karṇaparvan*, the help that Brahmā and Śiva offer to Kṛṣṇa (i.e. Viṣṇu) and Arjuna evidences the mutually supportive interests of the three gods: their solidarity is indicative of an already significant interplay. When Arjuna finally decides to kill the evil Karṇa, he first asks permission from Kṛṣṇa, Bhava (= Śiva), and Brahmā (*MBh.* 8.65.3). The gods of the *trimūrti* are also evoked in *Mahābhārata* 9.52, where Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva send the warriors who die on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra straight to heaven. Even in the *Nārāyaṇīya* section of the *Śāntiparvan* (*MBh.* 12.335.11–18; 12.337.16–36), there appears to be an implicit recognition of the *trimūrti* scheme.

If Kṛṣṇa is a manifestation of Viṣṇu, then by the same token Arjuna in his destructive impetus

is an alter ego of Śiva operating world dissolution (*pralaya*). As the *Mahābhārata* insists on the ultimate identity of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, it also highlights the interdependence and ontological unity of Viṣṇu and Śiva, of Hari and Hara. As A. Hildebeitel has noted,

it is not surprising that Kṛṣṇa should subordinate himself to Arjuna as his charioteer. For he is, in fact, subordinating himself to Arjuna in his destructive dimension as a form of Śiva. But again, one must not forget the double soteriological language. For not only do they mutually subordinate themselves to each other as alternate representations of *puruṣa* and Mahāpuruṣa. They also ride together as the two Kṛṣṇas on the one chariot of the “impartial” Brahmā, the Brahmā with whom Kṛṣṇa is compared, and the Brahmā who can be “superior to the gods,” even Śiva or Viṣṇu, only because he is the personification of the *Brahman* in which all hierarchies and distinctions merge and cease. (Hildebeitel, 1984, 26)

In the *Harivaṃśa*, possibly dating to the 2nd or 3rd century CE, one comes across complementary triads of divinities: on a cosmic plane, the triad of Viṣṇu, Śeṣa, and the goddess Nidrā, to which on the earthly plane corresponds the triad of Kṛṣṇa, Saṃkarṣaṇa, and Ekānaṃśā. The three gods are represented on an equal footing and as an interdependent whole. Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa is the creator god; Nidrā-Ekānaṃśā plays either a protective or a destructive role; and Śeṣa-Saṃkarṣaṇa personifies either the world’s support or the world’s quiescence.

Harivaṃśa 2.125.31–35 – which again the authors of the BORI edition interpret as a late interpolation – offers a remarkable passage on the *trimūrti*. The text is part of the *Hariharamāhātmya* (HV. 2.125.29–57), extolling the identity of Viṣṇu and Śiva:

I (i.e. Mārkaṇḍeya) shall declare to thee (i.e. Brahmā) that form composed of Hari and Hara combined that is without beginning, middle, or end and that is imperishable, undecaying. He who is Viṣṇu is Rudra; he who is Rudra is Pitāmaha (“The Grandfather”; i.e. Brahmā). Rudra, Viṣṇu, and Pitāmaha: three gods in one form (*ekā mūrtis trayo devā rudraviṣṇupitāmahāḥ*). They are the benefactors, the makers of the worlds, the protectors of the worlds, and the self-existent ones. They are Ardhanārīśvara and intent on severe obser-

vances. As water thrown in water is nothing but water, so when Viṣṇu enters Rudra, he is wholly Rudra. As when fire enters fire, there is nothing but fire, so when Rudra enters Viṣṇu, he is wholly Viṣṇu. (HV. 2.125.31–35; trans. by author)

As noted already, the proclamation of the oneness of Viṣṇu and Śiva is not at all exceptional, being found in various places of the *Mahābhārata* (3.39.76–77; 12.342). Following the seminal works of M. Biardeau (1981–1994) and A. Hildebeitel (1984), the analysis of *Harivaṃśa* 2.125.31–35 and of other epic passages leads to the following conclusions:

1. A characteristic of both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Harivaṃśa* is their aim to present the two major *bhakti* gods Viṣṇu and Śiva on an equal footing, as per Smārta theology.

2. Their rivalry in the epic accounts betrays their complementary character: if they differ in function, they are nonetheless regarded as ontologically identical.

3. The *trimūrti* is related to the synthetic, dual icons of Harihara and Ardhanārīśvara, the lord who is half female, that is, Śiva-Śakti. The Harihara icon appears as the logical antecedent of the *trimūrti* concept, which will then be extended to include Brahmā, though the latter’s significance in the *bhakti* context of both the epics and the Purāṇas is much more limited.

In the Purāṇas, the joint actions of the three gods – both upholding one another and competing among themselves for supremacy – are numerous. Indeed, it is here that the *trimūrti* scheme is explicitly and repeatedly affirmed, often in combination with the theory of the three *guṇas*. The puranic narratives of the triad of gods reflect a variety of sectarian concerns. Though even here one meets with the idea that Śiva and Viṣṇu are identical (*SauP.* 29.48ff.; 31.57ff.), depending on the Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava orientation of any given Purāṇa, either Śiva or Viṣṇu is presented as superior, being identified as the transcendent godhead: thus for Śaivas, Śiva is verily the sole god, and Brahmā and Viṣṇu are but attributes or particular manifestations of him. By the same token, Vaiṣṇavas uphold the superiority of Viṣṇu, who is said to encompass all names and forms. For instance, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* states, “The only God, Janārdana [‘Tormentor of Men’; i.e. Viṣṇu], takes the designation of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva,

accordingly as he creates, preserves, or brings to an end" (*ViP*. 1.2.62; trans. Gonda, 1968, 221).

Exceptionally, a few Purāṇas magnify Brahmā as the highest godhead, though he is admittedly a secondary figure whose cult had already declined by the 4th–5th centuries CE. A noteworthy illustration in which Brahmā is extolled as supreme is found in the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*:

As I (i.e. Mārkaṇḍeya) have told you (i.e. Krauṣṭuki), when the unmanifest nature (*pradhāna*) is agitated, the god called Brahmā is born, situated in the cavity of the egg. At first he is the agitator, and then he, who is the husband of nature (*prakṛti*), is that which should be agitated. He is the *pradhāna*, with its contraction and manifestation. Though born he is the source of the universe. Though he is without *guṇas*, he takes on the *guṇa rajas* in order to engage in creation and thus becomes Brahmā. As Brahmā he emits creatures; then, having an excess of the *guṇa sattva*, he becomes Viṣṇu and righteously protects all creatures; thereafter, having an excess of the *guṇa tamas*, he becomes Rudra, dissolves the three worlds, and sleeps. Though he possesses the three *guṇas*, he is devoid of them... As Brahmā he manifests the worlds, as Rudra he dissolves them, and as Viṣṇu he holds a neutral position. These are the three states of the self-existent. The lord of the worlds as Brahmā is *rajas*, as Rudra *tamas*, and as Viṣṇu *sattva*: these are the three gods, these are the three *guṇas*. (*MārP*. 46.11–18; trans. by author)

The *trimūrti*'s role is specifically linked to the cyclical emission, preservation, and annihilation of the world and is thus assimilated to the sphere of transmigration (*saṃsāra*). The three gods are not involved with the original manifestation (*sarga*, *prākṛtasarga*) taking place at the beginning of each life of Brahmā (*mahākālpa*; see cosmic cycles). Instead, they are thought to operate at the inferior level of the secondary re-manifestation (*pratisarga*) of the universe, which occurs at the beginning of each day of Brahmā. This seems to be the reason why the *trimūrti* as such has never been the object of worship. If in the Purāṇas Viṣṇu and Śiva rise to the level of *puruṣa*, of *brahman*, and are therefore worshipped in their own terms as both the transcendent and the immanent godhead, Brahmā – with rare exceptions such as the one reported above – is confined to the *pratisarga* level. Being linked to the law of *karman* and to the unending cycles of births and deaths at both a

cosmological and a human level, the creator god is the emblem of inexorable fate (*daiva*): he is the personification of *vidhi*, that is, ritual injunction, the upholder of the Vedas and of Brahmanical orthodoxy, not of *bhakti* and liberation (*mokṣa*).

In epic and puranic sources, the male triad is not infrequently flanked by a triad of goddesses understood to be their spouses. Vāc or Sarasvatī accompanies Brahmā, Śrī-Lakṣmī accompanies Viṣṇu, and Umā-Pārvatī or Durgā/Kālī accompanies Śiva. From the perspective of Devī worshippers, the goddess as Parāśakti is identified with the transcendent *brahman* as well as with *prakṛti*, that is, she is thought to be the very source of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. She is then revered as the mother of the male gods and of all creatures. Triads of goddesses are known from vedic times. For instance, in the *Āpri* hymns of the *Ṛgveda*, we find mention of Bhāratī, Iḍā, and Sarasvatī (e.g. see *ṚV*. 2.1.11, where they are associated with Agni).

Through an accurate survey of the main cosmological divergences in puranic materials, H. Brinkhaus (1999) has put forward the thesis that what he calls the *trimūrti* doctrine was preceded by an older, quite different doctrine of the three states (*tryavasthā*). He suggests that in both the epic and the puranic accounts, we are faced with the juxtaposition of two competing cosmological and theological schemes. The *tryavasthā* doctrine, also traceable in the *Manusmṛti* (1.5ff.), postulates the supreme reality of Brahmā as Svayambhū, the self-existent lord of the universe, who is characterized by three states:

1. as the demiurge Brahmā, he is in charge of creation (the *guṇa rajas* then predominates);
2. as *kāla*, that is, inexorable time, he is in charge of annihilation (the *guṇa tamas* then predominates); and
3. as *puruṣa*, he remains inactive, that is, he rests as Nārāyaṇa on the waters of the primeval ocean (the *guṇa sattva* then predominates).

This scheme embraces the cyclical alternation of the unfolding and reabsorption of the world and is more comprehensive than the *trimūrti* scheme that concerns itself with only one period of manifestation/maintenance/destruction.

Whereas in the *tryavasthā* design, the emphasis is on the cosmic pause of inactivity, that is, the state of absorption between a destruction and a re-manifestation of the world, in the *trimūrti* pattern, the emphasis is on the intermediate, active phase

of upholding the cosmos between manifestation and destruction. As M. Biardeau (1981, 55–57) has noticed, in the various cosmogonic accounts it is the role of the *guṇa sattva* (i.e. Puruṣa/Viṣṇu) that appears puzzling, since it serves different purposes: as Puruṣa/Nārāyaṇa, following the *tryavasthā* scheme, it is linked to stagnation; as Viṣṇu, following the *trimūrti* scheme, it is linked to maintenance.

H. Brinkhaus posits that the distant, inexorable god Brahmā came to be admitted as a member of the *trimūrti* for the simple reason that he was the main figure in the older and perhaps original *tryavasthā* framework. According to him, the overlapping of the *tryavasthā* and *trimūrti* schemes is detectable in the seminal passage of the *Vanaparvan* quoted above, in which the “three states” (*tisro ’vasthāḥ*) of the supreme god Prajāpati are openly described for the first time. He observes that immediately preceding this explicit mention of the *trimūrti* (*MBh.* 3, app. I, 27.35–36) is an account of the three cosmic phases as per the *tryavasthā* scheme (vv. 5–34): first *kāla* destroys the world (v. 5); then Puruṣa retires to rest (vv. 16–17); and finally Brahmā springs out of Puruṣa’s navel in order to newly manifest the world (vv. 28–30).

The *Mahābhārata* passage would thus mirror the superimposition of the *trimūrti* scheme – set within the framework of *bhakti* and witnessing the affirmation of the great gods Viṣṇu and Śiva – on an older conception of a fatalistic, supreme god (i.e. Brahmā), destined to become a more and more remote deity and a *deus otiosus*. In fact, H. Brinkhaus suggests that Viṣṇu and Śiva were not really appropriate for the triadic scheme, which was originally tailored for prototypes of fate such as Brahmā and *kāla*. He further argues that a similar blending of the two doctrines can be found in the older Purāṇas, such as the *Mārkaṇḍeyapurāṇa*.

Apparently, the *tryavasthā* and *trimūrti* schemes were both prominent side by side for a certain time. H. Brinkhaus sees proof of this in two works of Kālidāsa (5th cent. CE), the *Kumārasaṃbhava* and the *Raghuvamśa*. In chapter 2 of the *Kumārasaṃbhava*, in which Indra and other deities praise Brahmā, he interprets the poet’s eulogy of the triple-formed (*trimūrtaye*) creator god who differentiated himself in accordance with the three *guṇas* (*guṇatrayavibhāgāya*; *KumS.* 2.4ff.) as evidence of a Brahmā-based theology following the *tryavasthā* scheme. In

this regard, the most significant verse is the following:

Bringing forth [your] greatness in three states (*tisṛbhis tvam avasthābhir*), you are the sole cause of the dissolution, stagnation and creation (*pralayasthitisargāṇām*) [of the world]. (*KumS.* 2.6; trans. Brinkhaus, 1999, 44n55)

In order to strengthen his hypothesis, H. Brinkhaus translates *sthiti* as “stagnation” rather than “maintenance” or “preservation” as per the classic *trimūrti* scheme. However, in two other verses of the *Kumārasaṃbhava*, the *trimūrti* is clearly evoked. In the first verse, Śiva is extolled as the godhead who manifests himself in the three forms of Brahmā, Visnu, and Śiva:

What form of you is this? The one by which you create (*srjasi*) the manifest universe? Or the one by which you support (*bibharṣi*) it? Or, indeed, the one that destroys (*saṃhartā*) it? (*KumS.* 6.23; trans. Smith, 2005, 217)

In the second verse, the equality of the triad of gods is emphasized:

There is just one form, which divided three ways (*tridhā*). Each of them might appear first or last, sometimes Śiva the Destroyer before Viṣṇu, sometimes Yellow Viṣṇu before him, the Creator having his praises sung by them both, or both of them by the Creator. (*KumS.* 7.44; trans. Smith, 2005, 271)

Kālidāsa also mentions the *trimūrti* in two verses of the *Raghuvamśa*, in which Śiva and Viṣṇu, respectively, are extolled as the godhead performing the three functions of the triad: (1) “[you (i.e. Śiva) are] the cause of the creation, preservation and destruction” (*sargasthitipratyavahārahetuḥ*; *RaghV.* 2.44; trans. Brinkhaus, 1999, 45n57); (2) “Hail to you [i.e. Viṣṇu], the creator of the universe (*namo viśvasṛje*)... preserving the universe (*viśvam... anubibhrate*)... the destroyer of the universe” (*viśvasya saṃhartre tubhyam*; *RaghV.* 10.16; trans. Brinkhaus, 1999, 45n56).

Iconographic Testimonies

Representations of the triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva – each with his own distinctive marks (*lakṣaṇas*) – emerge from around the 6th to 7th centuries CE. The Harihara and Ardhanārīśvara images of the Kushana and Gupta periods were

probably a pioneering inspiration for them. The different ways in which the *trimūrti* is portrayed in sculpture have been classified by T.A. Gopinatha Rao (1916) as follows:

1. Śiva, clear as crystal, with three eyes and four arms, standing erect with only one leg, usually on a lotus pedestal (*padmapīṭha*): from the right and left of Śiva's body emanate Brahmā (with four heads and four arms) and Viṣṇu (with four arms). This form is known as *ekapādātrimūrti*. The gods' vehicles may also be represented in it – Śiva's bull, Brahmā's *haṃsa*, and Viṣṇu's Garuḍa;

2. Brahmā and Viṣṇu issuing forth from either side of a *liṅga* (i.e. Śiva);

3. Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva standing erect side by side, often on three separate *padmapīṭhas*. A fine example dating to circa the 6th century CE is found in Ellora, cave 29 (Śiva, however, may also take the central position, as in Ellora, cave 16);

4. Each of the gods has a shrine reserved to him, and these shrines are contiguous: typically Brahmā is placed to the right, the *liṅga* (i.e. Śiva) stands at the center, and Viṣṇu is placed to the left.

With the exception of number 3, the main deity of these portrayals is Śiva, from whom Brahmā and Viṣṇu issue forth in both number 1 and number 2. Even stone reliefs of the Hindu triad from Kashmir typically present the sequence Brahmā-Śiva-Viṣṇu, with Śiva or the *liṅga* occupying the central, most important position.

Having never gained popularity among the masses, specimens of the *trimūrti* are altogether scarce in Indian art, even though images of the three gods combined together have been found as far as Java and Cambodia. In fact, the iconographical representations of the *trimūrti* never became a well-defined genre. The uncertainty with respect to the identity of various composite figures – that is, whether they should be regarded as the *trimūrti* – is revealing in this respect. A striking case of misinterpretation is the colossal three-faced bust (6th-7th cents. CE) located in the cave shrine of the Elephanta Island near Mumbai. For a long time, this famous sculpture was erroneously thought to represent Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva – even nowadays it is publicized as the Indian *trimūrti* – though it is actually a composite form of Śiva Mahādeva: at the center, looking east, is his gentle, auspicious (*saumya*) face; on the proper

right, looking south, is his terrific (*ghora*) face; on the proper left, looking north, is the face of his consort Umā, that is, his *śakti*.

Moreover, the individual figures making up the triad may change and the group of gods may even be extended to incorporate a fourth or a fifth deity. In particular, the sun-god Sūrya sometimes takes the place of Brahmā, more seldom of Viṣṇu and Śiva, and we know of triads in which Sūrya figures as the main deity. Enlarged, composite images include Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā, and Sūrya or else Śiva, Viṣṇu, Devī, and Sūrya. We even come across representations of various kinds of pentads, among which is the Smārta pentad of Viṣṇu, Śiva, Devī, Sūrya, and Gaṇeśa.

Although the *trimūrti* as such did not start a cult, there are individual gods who have come to be worshipped as the triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. A notable example is that of Datta or Dattātreya, a minor *avatāra* of Viṣṇu and a puranic integrative deity whose worship is centered in the Marathi cultural area but whose icons and temples are found all across the subcontinent, in Kashmir as well as Nepal. Dattātreya has come to be identified with the three gods of the *trimūrti* standing side by side, an icon usually referred to as Hari-Hara-Pitāmaha. From around the 11th-12th centuries, he is sculptured as Viṣṇu seated in *yoga* posture, his triple nature being indicated by the emblems and vehicles of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. In the mid-16th century, the modern and nowadays most popular three-headed (*trimukhī*) portrayal of Dattātreya emerged: he is represented as either standing or seated in *padmāsana*, with three heads – the central one being that of Viṣṇu – and six arms bearing the emblems of the *trimūrti*. He is often depicted as an ascetic attended by three or four dogs, said to symbolize the Vedas, and by a cow, said to symbolize mother earth.

Western Encounters

The first European author to mention the Hindu triad was the Portuguese Duarte Barbosa (1480–1521). Significantly, he superimposed the Christian doctrine of the Trinity on the *trimūrti* concept, which he saw akin to it. In his travel book he wrote:

These Brahmans greatly honour the number trine: they hold that there is a God in three persons, and who is not more than one. All their

prayers and ceremonies are in honour of the trinity, and they, so to say, figure it in their rites, and the name by which they call it is this, Berma [i.e. Brahmā] Besnu [i.e. Viṣṇu] Maycereni [i.e. Maheśvara, that is, Śiva], who are three persons and one sole god. (Barbosa, 1995, 122–123)

Along the centuries, European missionaries conceded that the Indians possessed a pristine, natural knowledge of the one God, and even postulated that within Hinduism there were remnants of a lost Christianity, which had been later supplanted by Islam. In their search for analogies, they were naturally fascinated by the *trimūrti*. The Italian Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), though condemning the Hindu triad as a confusion disseminated by Satan, found an adumbration of the “recondite mystery of the most Holy Trinity” (*mysterium reconditum Sanctissimae Trinitatis*) in the *Taittirīyopaniṣad* (1.6.1; Amaladass & Clooney, 2005, 98–99). And the French physician and traveler François Bernier (1620–1688) observed the following:

With respect to these three Beings [of the *trimūrti*], I have met with some European missionaries, who pretend that the Heathens have some idea of the Mystery of the Trinity; and say that it is expressly declared in their Books, that they are three Persons in one God. I myself have frequently discoursed with the Brahmins on this Subject, but they expressed themselves so confusedly, that I never could understand their Meaning perfectly. (Lockman, vol. II, 1743, 246)

In his influential *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, the abbé J.A. Dubois (1765–1848) interpreted the *trimūrti* as the personification of the elements earth, water, and fire and concluded that “even granted...that the primitive Hindus intended to transmit...the idea of the Trinity under the form and attributes of the *Trimurti*...the result has been a sadly distorted presentation of this great mystery” (Dubois, 1990, 554).

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, the Trinity was debated between missionaries and Hindu authorities. The missionaries took pains to translate their complex notion of the tri-natured God (*trirūpakeśvara*), while Hindus understood the Trinity in their own terms, namely viewing the Christian doctrine of the triune God as analogous to the ultimate oneness in *brahman* of a plural number of deities.

To be sure, the parallel that Western travelers and missionaries had originally instituted between the Trinity and the *trimūrti* influenced the way in which Hindus looked at the triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva. Nonetheless, while in the West debates arose whether the *trimūrti* should be understood as a derivation from the Christian Trinity or whether, as Louis Jacolliot (1837–1890) argued, it were actually the Christians who acquired the Trinity from India, Hindus themselves did not upgrade the *trimūrti* concept into a full-fledged doctrine (*vāda*). And when in the 19th century Hindu apologists responded to John Muir’s (1810–1882) Sanskrit treatise *Mataparikṣā* (1839), a critique of the religious and philosophical teachings of Hinduism from a Christian point of view, their positive assessment of the Trinity was not argued by pointing at the analogy with the *trimūrti* but rather by having recourse to the two-tiered epistemology of Advaita Vedānta – in other words, via the recognition that *brahman* is apprehended as a variously manifested Īśvara at the lower level of relative truth (*vyāvahārikasatya*) and as one, ineffable reality at the upper level of supreme truth (*pāramārthikasatya*; Young, 1981, 119–120n125).

In time, the Trinity came to be linked to the vedantic triad of *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*. The Brāhma Samāj reformer Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–1884), in his lecture “That Marvelous Mystery – the Trinity” (Jan. 1882), was apparently the first to correlate the Father, Son, and Spirit of the Christian Trinity to the notions of *sat*, *cit*, and *ānanda*, respectively, which he explained as truth, intelligence, and joy (Scott, 1979, 39–40, 228, 245; Clooney, 2011, 316–317). Inspired by such correspondence, in 1950 the Benedictine monks Jules Monchanin alias Svāmin Paramārubyānanda (1895–1957) and Henry Le Saux alias Svāmin Abhiṣiktānanda (1910–1973) founded an *āśram* in Shantivanam, Tamil Nadu, which they dedicated to the Trinity – namely, the Saccidānanda *āśram*. In his approach to the experience of non-duality (*advaita*), Father Monchanin magnified India as the land of the Trinity itself (Monchanin, 1957, 37). He remarked the following:

Only the mystery of the Trinity is capable of resolving the antinomies which cause Hindu thought to swing endlessly between monism and pluralism, between a personal and an impersonal God. (Boyd, 1969, 219)

Even Christians, however, fail to penetrate the glorious mystery of the Trinity. Father Le Saux has observed that this is precisely the reason why it is usually downgraded to an inferior *trimūrti*:

The liturgy struggles helplessly today in its efforts to celebrate the Trinity. Mass and office are very poor. There is no understanding of or feeling for the Trinity in the composition of this office. The Trinity, a crude, second-rate *Trimūrti* for the common run of Christians and theologians. (Abhishiktananda, 1998, 102)

In a philosophical perspective, comparisons of the *trimūrti* concept with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity are found in the thought of G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831). In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, G.W.F. Hegel, for whom Hinduism appears as the prototype of the principle of substantiality (*Substantialität*), observes that, although the idea of the *trimūrti* is laudable and worthy of attention, “having the abstract form to become the concrete characterization of the spirit,” it is a “superficial personification” of *brahman* not “elevated unto the concept” (Viyagappa, 1980, 121) – in other words, it is nothing but abstract unity. If the gods of the *trimūrti* appear as independent beings (*selbständige Wesenheiten*), distinguished from the simple substance, which is *brahman*, they still disappear in the one, which means that they are ultimately untrue and they do not form a community of the one. In the *trimūrti*, he argues, Śiva is only the moment of destruction and not the return and reconciliation of the separated. For G.W.F. Hegel, Indian thought fails to unfold the idea of the person, the autonomous individual subject. Although he recognizes that between the *trimūrti* and the Christian Trinity there is a “common element of conceptualization,” he observes that there is an essential difference between the two since “in true Trinity,” besides a unity, there is a community – “a conclusion unto the unity full of content and actuality, which in its total concreteness is spirit” (Viyagappa, 1980, 184–186).

In his *Philosophy of Mythology*, F.W.J. Schelling (1775–1854) claims that, although the Indian tradition exhibits a deep yearning toward unity, there is not an originally pure notion of divine oneness in Hinduism. According to him, the abstract principle of *brahman* is not to be equated with the God of monotheism but is rather a philosophical afterthought, a secondary phenomenon. He notes that

the Hindu tradition appears dominated by the separation of the *trimūrti*'s three principles. F.W.J. Schelling underlines the primacy of Śiva, whereas Brahmā, the “real God,” is but a lost and forgotten god, and Viṣṇu, though he may seem to restore the lost and destroyed unity, cannot recover the true sense of monotheism: indeed, Viṣṇu and Śiva appear as sectarian, mutually exclusive principles (Halbfass, 1988, 103).

On his part, A. Schopenhauer (1788–1860) interprets the *trimūrti* in terms of his own philosophy of the will to live, in which Śiva's *liṅga* is a symbol of generation as well as annihilation. In *The World as Will and Idea*, he writes the following:

Thus the will to live appears just as much in suicide (Śiva) as in the satisfaction of self-preservation (Viṣṇu) and in the sensual pleasure of procreation (Brahmā). This is the inner meaning of the unity of the *trimūrti*, which is embodied in its entirety in every human being, though in time it raises now one, now another, of its three heads. (Schopenhauer, vol. I, 1909, 510)

Conclusion

Over the centuries, the Western fascination with the *trimūrti*, the insisted comparison and correlation of this integrative concept with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, determined a significant modification of its original meaning and function (see Slaje, 2012). The European assessment of the *trimūrti* brought about a process of re-enculturation, through which the Hindu self-understanding of the concept was subject to inevitable transformations. Particularly in the 20th century, the *trimūrti* scheme has become increasingly popular, part and parcel of the vedantic inclusivistic framework of neo-Hinduism. Nowadays this development is plainly illustrated in the many introductory books to Hinduism, both in India and in the West, which present the triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva as one of the religion's cornerstone features. In contemporary iconography, one even witnesses the emergence of new *trimūrtis* such as that of Lakṣmī, Gaṇeśa, and Sarasvatī: with the traditional male triumvirate as its inspiring model, this recent triad appears to stand for lucre, luck, and learning, respectively – three concrete goals toward which most humans aspire (Smith, 1999).

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