

The Great River

The story of Goddess Ganga,
Lord Shiva and the River Ganges

Who is Lord Shiva?

- Shiva is the destroyer god. He destroys, so he can get rid of all the bad in the world.
- He is the third member of the Hindu trinity of Brahma (the creator god) and Vishnu (the preserver god)

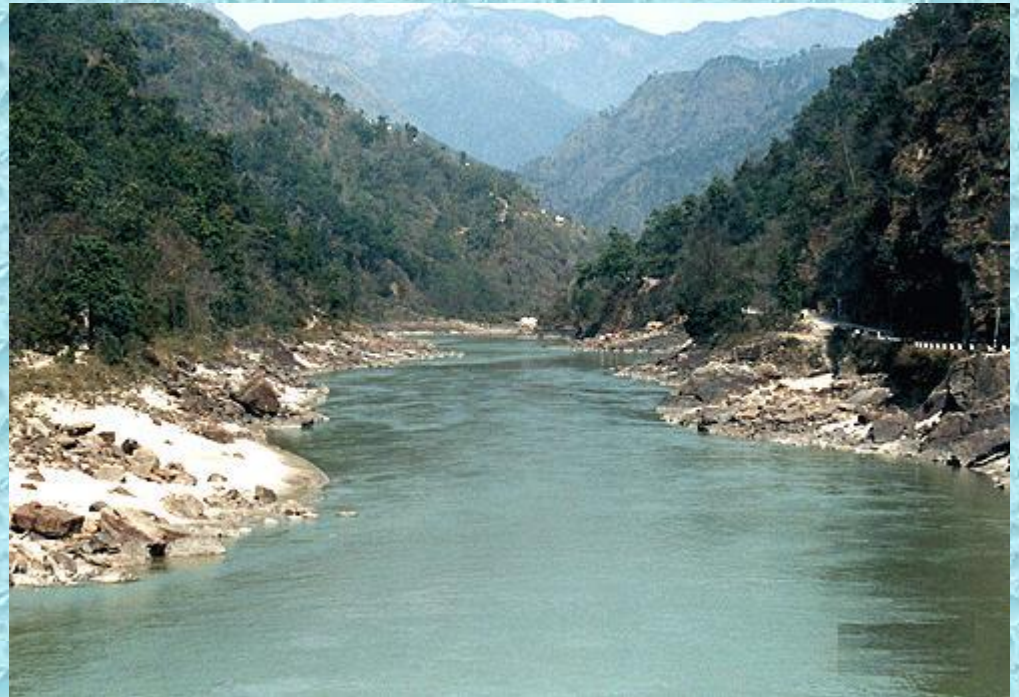
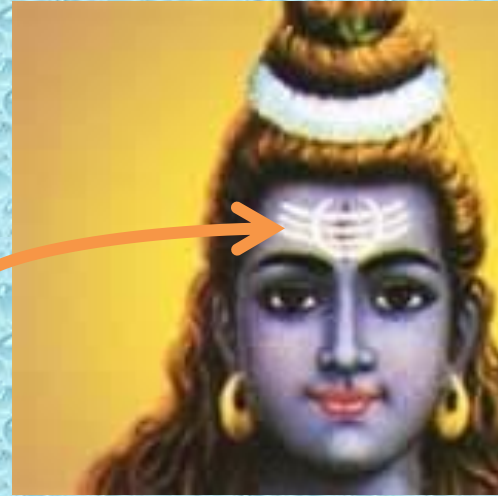


Symbols associated with Lord Shiva

1. Sacred Ganga
2. Crescent
3. Matted hair
4. Cobra
5. Trident
6. Tiger skin

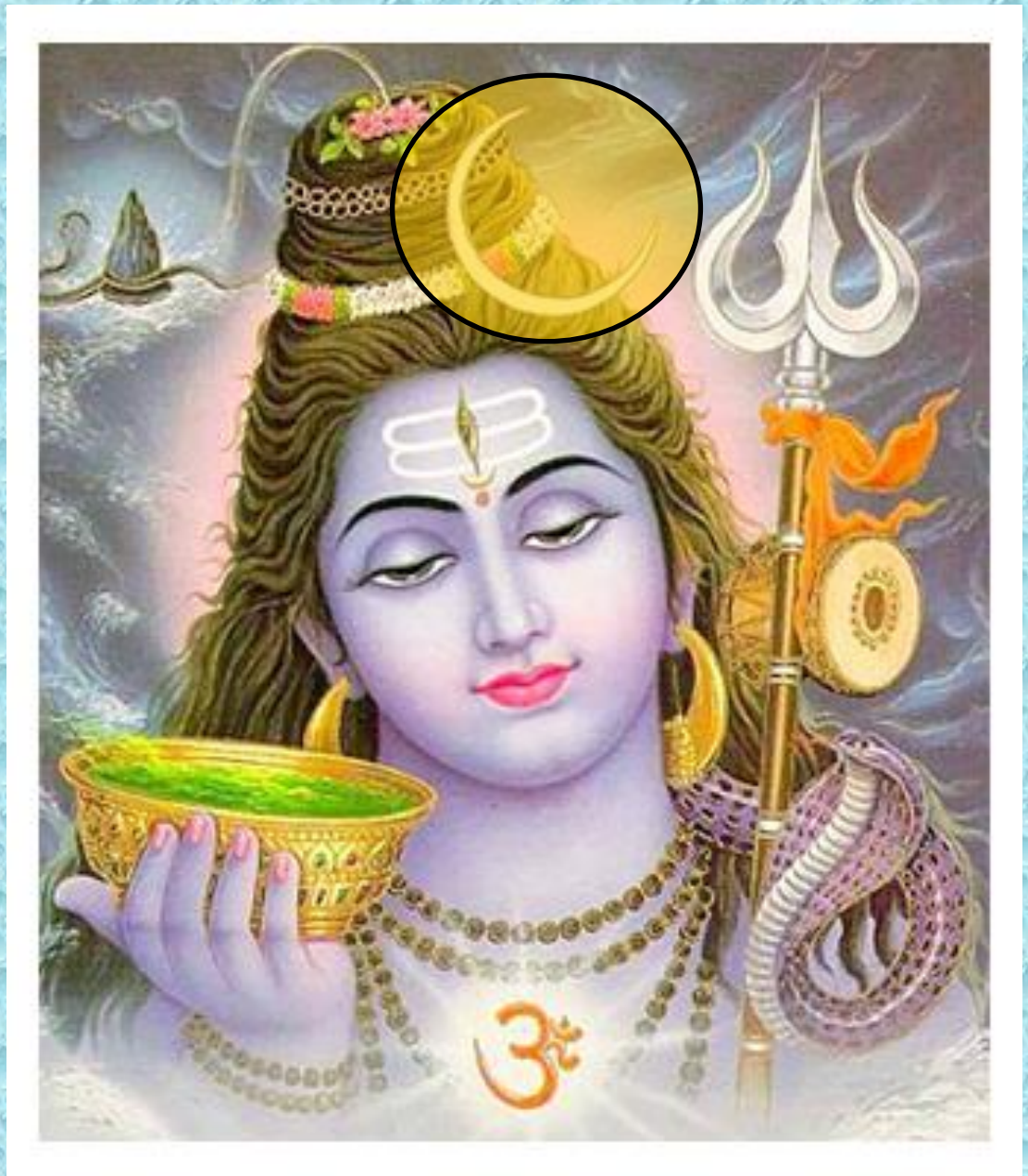
Sacred Ganga

The holiest of rivers, the Ganga (also known as the Ganges) flows from the crown of Shiva's head. This represents the causal waters from which the earth arises. It also represents the essential instrument of ritual purification. By holding the Ganga on his head, Shiva allowed an outlet to the great holy river to cross the earth and bring purifying water to humans.



Crescent

Shiva bears on his head the crescent of the fifth day (panchami) moon. This is placed near the fiery third eye and this shows the power of Soma, the sacrificial offering, which is the representative of the moon. It means that Shiva possesses the power of procreation along with power of destruction.



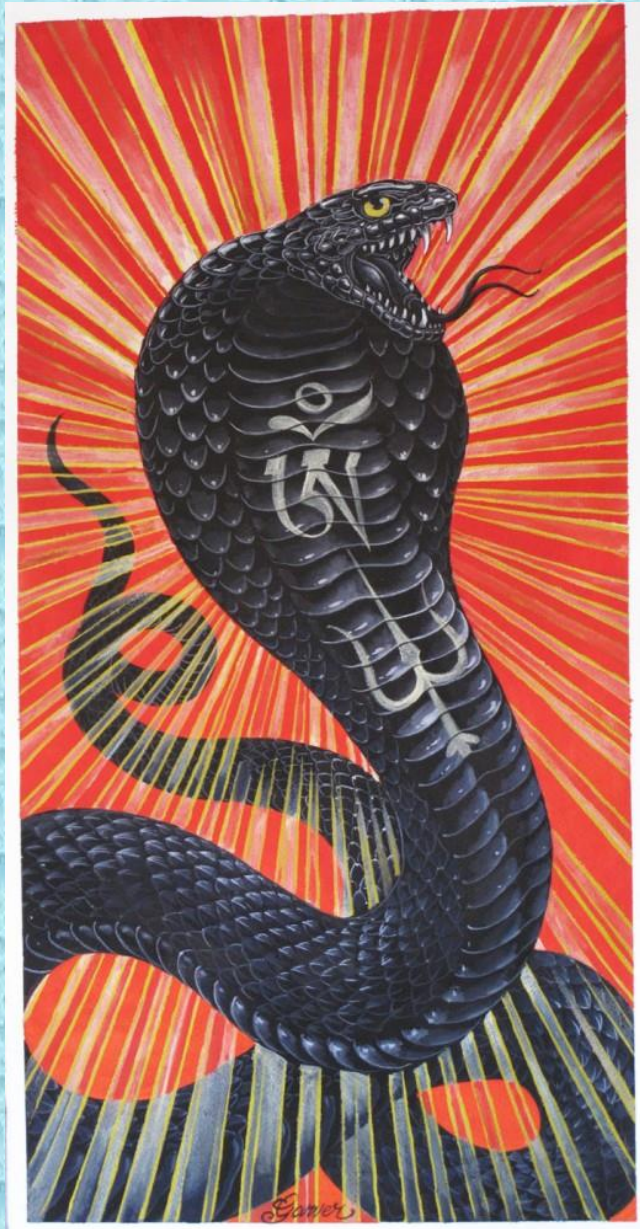
Matted hair

The flowing jata or matted hair of Shiva represent him as the lord of wind, Vayu, who is the subtle form of breath present in all living beings.



Cobra

Shiva is beyond the power of death, even though he is surrounded by death. This is emphasised by his name Nilakantha. The god drank the deadly poison Kalakuta to free the world from its effects. The cobras around his neck also represent the dominant energy called Kundalini, the serpent power.



Trident

The Trishula of Shiva is the symbol of the three functions of God – the Creator, the Preserver and the Destroyer. It also represents the instrument of punishment to the evil doer on all the three planes – spiritual, subtle and physical.



Tiger skin

The tiger is the vehicle of Shakti, the goddess of power and force. Shiva is beyond and above any kind of force. He is the master of Shakti. The tiger skin that he wears symbolises victory of every force.





The Great River



Long, long ago, when the great god Lord Brahma was looking down upon the earth, he saw that a terrible fire had spread over all the land.



Horrified, he watched the hungry flames
destroying everything in their path all over the
world.



The goddess Ganga, full of purity, leapt to offer her help: “Send me to earth Lord Brahma, I will quench the fire.”

The mighty Ganga was strong and passionate; her beautiful hair and clothes flowed around her in watery splendour.





Lord Brahma told her to take the form of a rushing mighty torrent of water, because water puts out fire the best. She swiftly leapt to help, and transformed herself into a cascading river in full flow, and she dashed down to earth.



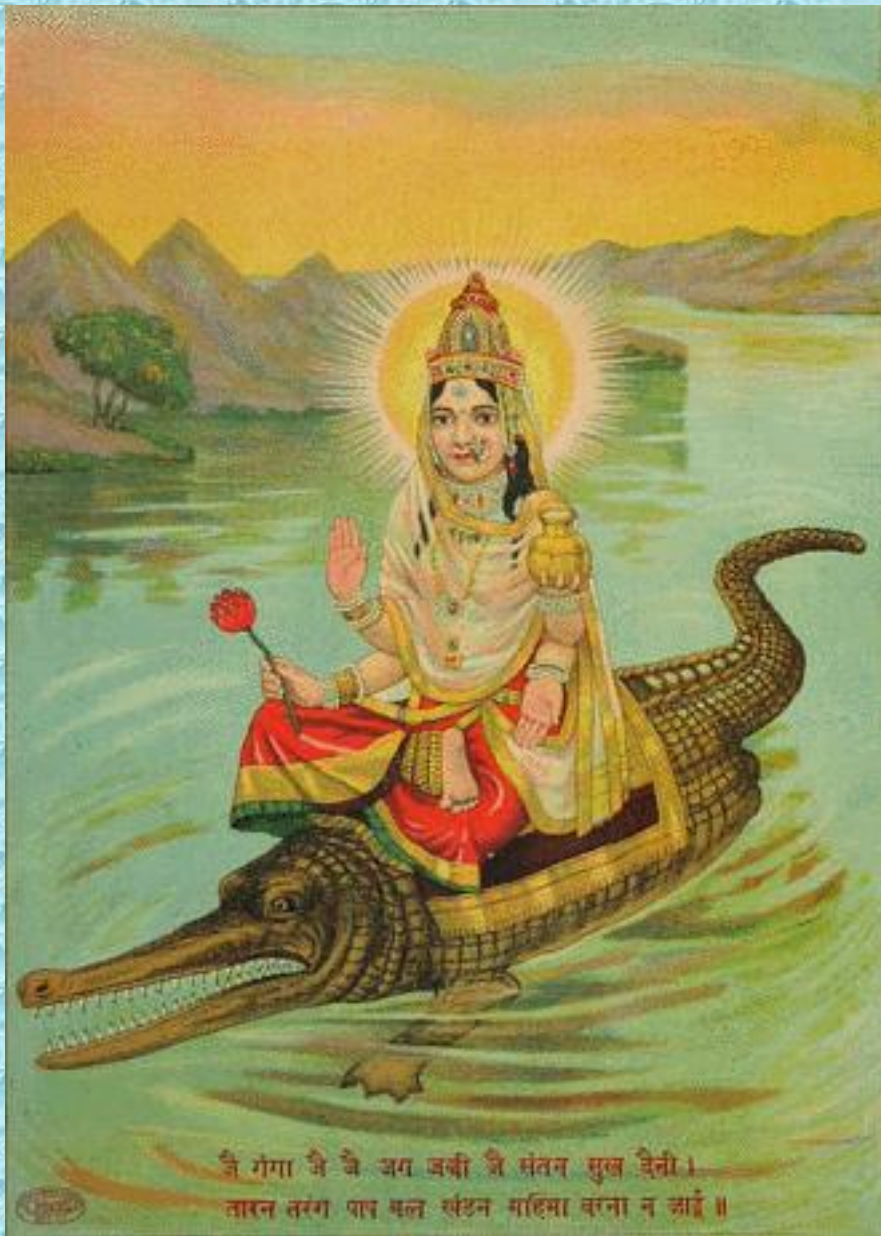
Lord Shiva, another of the gods, watched as goddess Ganga dashed to the rescue. He realised at once that she was so strong that she would not just put out the fire: she would destroy the whole earth as well.

Shiva wanted to help too, so he jumped down to the burning earth even faster than Ganga, and stood firmly on the ground.



Ganga's torrents of water hit Shiva with full force on the head. Her mighty waterfall splashed through his long hair, and cascaded down to the earth below in seven fast flowing streams. Instead of destroying the earth, the waters of Ganga splashed off Shiva's tangled hair and quenched the fires that burned.





Ganga spread out across the hot dead lands, bringing life wherever she flowed. The rivers of Ganga filled with fish, who played in the water. The banks and plains flooded with water, and plants grew fast, animals came to drink, people to bathe.

Ganga became the
life-giving river,
mother to all of
India.



A Journey Down the Ganges

