

## ICONOGRAPHY OF HANUMAN

The epic story of the *Ramayana* plays an important role all over South Asia. Many different versions exist, among these is the Valmiki *Ramayana* written somewhere before 600C.E. (Nagar 85). In this epic drama of over 20,000 verses, there are numerous characters idealized by Hindu society, including the god Hanuman. Known by many names, Hanuman, Maruti, Pavanakumara, Vayu-tanaya, Anjaneya... is an anthropomorphic monkey god whose divinity represents the divine within the human and animal kingdoms (Channa 33, Nagar 41). While Rama and Sita are seen as the ultimate icons of the ideal man and woman, Hanuman is the ultimate example in loyalty and servitude, displayed by his devotional relationship with Rama, an *avatar* of visnu.

Hanuman is the son of the wind god Vayu, and a langur monkey; thus he has a monkey face with an upright human-like body. As myth has it, Hanuman's mother and langur monkey, Anjani, was standing in human form at the edge of a riverbank. When Vayu blew by and saw Anjani, he was captivated by her beauty, and with a strong gust of wind which blew off her clothes, she became pregnant (Channa 33-34). Various sections of India claim to be the birthplace of Hanuman, and thus it is unknown. Hanuman as a child was quite mischievous and knowing his incredible superpowers, was extremely brave and in a way, arrogant. He could not be tamed until a group of sages, angry with his conduct cursed him to forget his powers only to recover his memory when someone reminded him (Nagar 42). This someone would eventually prove to me Rama. Hanuman lives his life loyal to his master, playing a large role in the *Ramayana*. Later he appears in the *Mahabharata*, since thought his father Vayu, he his brothers with Bhima, one of the Pandava brothers (Nagar 89).

Hanuman possesses many mystical abilities, which include the ability to expand or shrink his invincibly strong body to the size of a mountain or that of a thumb and super strength (Nagar

237). These were awarded to him by other gods when Hanuman was a small child (Nagar 41). Often Hanuman is depicted displaying these abilities in service to Rama (Channa 33). At one point in the *Ramayana*, Hanuman is sent to get medicine from a mountain in the Himalayas. Upon arrival at the mountain, Hanuman forgets what he was sent to retrieve, so he enlarges himself to a size big enough to pick up the whole mountain and carry it with one hand back to Rama. As a result of this incredible act, pictures of Hanuman carrying a mountain in one hand are common. Another tale of the *Ramayana*, Hanuman jumps across the ocean from the tip of southern India to Lanka in search of Sita. Upon locating Sita, she insists Rama rescue her because it is his *dharma* to do so. Hanuman respects this, leaving Sita to destroy much Lanka. Ravana eventually captures Hanuman, and sets his tail on fire to humiliate him. Upon release, Hanuman lights the whole city ablaze with his tail. (Channa 33). It is important to remember that Hanuman displays such power in service to Rama. Given this fact, another common image of Hanuman is one in which he is opening his chest with both hands to show Rama and Sita that they are deeply loved within his heart. Hanuman's strength is divine, and his service to Rama defines his character, he is depicted to emphasize these key attributes.

Hanuman is worshiped within Hinduism as the protector of evil forces. His name has even come to be known as Sankat-Mochan which means "The one who delivers from all troubles." Worshiped for good luck in any venture and also good health (Channa 34), Hanuman is worshiped commonly for gains of a materialistic nature as well (Aryan 88).

It should be noted that Hanuman is typically depicted at the side of Rama. Generally, Hanuman is standing in front and a little on the right side of Rama, only as tall as Rama's hip or chest. By and large these images are sculpted, with Hanuman having two hands. One hand hangs down to his knees, representing the respectful manner servants should have towards their

masters. The other hand, as a symbol of devotion to Rama, is raised up and placed over Hanuman's mouth. Hanuman's stance is intended to suggest to the onlooker empathy for Hanuman, should remind people of the faithfulness of Hanuman to Rama, and the willingness to serve (Nagar 250 Hanuman normally carries a golden *gada* or club, and may also have a golden crown on his head (Channa 34). He is sometimes depicted with hair all over his body. This hair is described as being yellow or golden. At other times, Hanuman is shown with no hair at all, and looks like he simply has a plain human body. Hanuman's monkey face and complexion are described in various texts, suggesting color from bright white, golden yellow or copper red and usually is compared to sunlight (see Nagar 241). Hanuman has incredibly muscular shoulders, arms and chest. This is evident for the reason that typically he is clothed in a basic loin cloth (Channa 34). His face is described as incredibly beautiful with eyes said to be various colors varying from yellow to red, with the "sparkle of heated gold". Hanuman also has a long tail, which when raised, looks like a flag (Nagar 245-248).

Hanuman is one of Hinduism's most extraordinary deities, whose divinity is celebrated by millions of people. His role as faithful messenger and servant to Visnu's *avatar* Rama has led Hanuman from being a semi-divine langur monkey, to the highest state of divinity to be worshiped among mainstream deities within the Hindu tradition. Not only does Hanuman rise up into his divinity with the help of Rama, he also shows that divinity is not only found within the human race, but the animal kingdom as well. Hindus have dedicated countless pieces of art to the monkey-god depicting Hanuman's bravery, strength and supernatural powers. This may be what led people to worship him as they do, but Hanuman is more than power. He is a perfect icon of loyalty, devotion, servitude, honor and morality within Hindu culture. As the epic story of the *Ramayana* lives on in the hearts of Hindus, so will the great monkey god Hanuman.

## References

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Nagar, S (2004) *Hanuman Through The Ages*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.

## Further Recommended Reading

Rao, T.A. G. (1914) *Elements of Hindu Iconography*. Madras: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Ltd.

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<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/hanuma.asp>

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