

33 CATEGORIES, NOT 33 CRORES

How often have you heard “Hindus believe in 33 crore gods?” Sometimes this is said even in a tone mockery implying that “If Hindus can believe in 33 crore gods, they would believe in anything!”

But this idea, so casually thrown around, is a gross misunderstanding of what is actually meant by crore. The Indian word for crore is “*Koti*” and the word itself has two connotations. One is of course the number “crore” but the other and the actual sense in which it is used in this context is “category” or class. Even in common parlance, don’t we say things like “*Uccha koti*”, “*Madhyam koti*” and “*Nimna koti*”? What is meant here is type/category or class.

So when it is said that there are “33 *kotis*” of gods, what is really meant? This idea of “33 *kotis* of gods” is actually rooted in our Vedic cosmology which says that there are **12 ADITYAS, 11 RUDRAS, 8 VASUS and 2 ASHWINS**. These make up the “33 *kotis*” or categories of gods. Now let us try to understand them one by one.

12 ADITYAS: They are what may be called the Solar deities. They are the 12 Cosmic forces or principles that sustain creation and protect the cosmic order. They are called the Adityas because they are the sons of Aditi, the Cosmic Mother. The 12 Adityas are: *Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Dhata, Shakra, Amsha, Vivasvan, Pusha, Savita, Tvashta* and *Vaman*. Since they are solar deities, they are also associated with the 12 months of the calendar and also the 12 Zodiac signs.

11 RUDRAS: They are supposed to be emanations of Rudra-Shiva and represent the principles of life force – its formation, destruction and dissolution. The 11 Rudras are: *Hara, Bahurupa, Trayambaka, Aparajita, Vrisakapi, Shambhu, Kapardi, Raivata, Mrigavyadha, Sarva, Kapali*. They also represent the different aspects of Pranic force and the mind in living beings.

8 VASUS: They represent the 8 building blocks of physical existence. The 8 Vasus are: the 5 elements of Space, Wind, Fire, Water and Earth, the sun, moon and all the stars. These are the constituents of the gross physical universe.

2 ASHWINS: They are the physicians of the gods. They represent the twin powers of healing and renewal. Ashwins means the “horse riders”. The horse imagery represents swift movement of prana and nerve forces and circulation which gives vitality.

So these are the 33 *kotis* or categories of cosmic deities. Without going into the complex Vedic cosmology, in a popular context, these 33 categories of Cosmic forces or deities can also be found in the Gita where the Lord when he reveals his awesome Universal form, tells Arjuna:

*Pashyadityan vasun rudran ashvinau marutas tatha
Bahuny adrishta-purvani pashyashcharyani bharata*

Behold the ADITYAS, the VASUS, the RUDRAS, the ASHWINS and also the MARUTS; behold many wonders never seen before, O Bharata.

GITA, Chap 11, Verse 6

In addition to the *Adityas*, *Rudras*, *Vasus* and the *Ashvins* there is also mention of the *Maruts* in this verse. The *Maruts* as interpreted by Sri Aurobindo are “thought forces” and expressions of Mental Energy. In effect, the Lord is saying in this very meaningful and significant verse that all these Cosmic forces including the manifestations of thought energy are nothing but expressions of his own Universal Form.

And finally, even if we take the other meaning of “*koti*” meaning crore, then too we need not feel apologetic about anything. Because in Hinduism there is the concept of “*Ishta Devata*” which means we can “wish” to see the Divine in a form that is endearing to us. In this sense, the 100 crore Hindus can have 100 crore gods! Why stop at 33 crore? Because no form is adequate to express the formless Divine. So we can have as many forms as we “wish”. Because they would still not express the true nature of the Cosmic Divine. But we can make our hearts happy contemplating the Lord in the form dear to us.