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Dashavatar: The Ten Avatars of Vishnu

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Dashavatar: The Ten Avatars of Vishnu

The Dashavatara are the ten avatars, or earthly forms, of the god Vishnu. Nine have already come in the stories. The tenth, Kalki, is still to come.

This lesson gives the ten in order and tells what each one did. It also shows how a village theatre in the Konkan acts out these stories.

The idea in brief

- **Avatar:** a form that a god takes on earth to help the world.
- **Ten avatars:** Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki.
- **Order:** the sequence is fixed. Exams test it.
- **Kalki:** the tenth avatar has not appeared yet.
- **Dashavatar theatre:** a folk play of the Konkan that is acted at night in village temples.



The ten avatars of Vishnu, shown in sequence, ending with Kalki on horseback. Wikimedia Commons (public domain).

What Are the Ten Avatars and Why Do They Come?

What is an avatar?

The word Dashavatara means the ten avatars of Vishnu. Vishnu is the Hindu god of preservation. An avatar is a form that he takes on earth.

Each avatar comes when the world is in danger. It may be a flood, a demon or a cruel ruler.

So read the ten stories as one pattern. Each time, Vishnu comes to protect the world and to restore dharma, the right way of living.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in; sangeetnatak.gov.in

What is the standard order?

The ten avatars come in this order: Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (man-lion) and Vamana (dwarf). Then come Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki.

In medieval and modern times Vishnu was believed to have come down to earth ten times to preserve the world and its culture.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in; archive.org



The standard order of the ten avatars. The pink box marks Kalki, who has not yet appeared. Sketch only.

The First Four Avatars

What did Matsya do?

Matsya is the first avatar. He comes as a fish.

A great flood threatens the world. Matsya saves the Vedas, the ancient scriptures, from the flood.

This shows divine protection of knowledge.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in

What did Kurma do?

Kurma is the second avatar. He comes as a tortoise.

The gods and demons are churning the ocean to get amrit, the nectar of immortality. They use Mount Mandara as the churning rod.

Kurma holds up the mountain on his back. His job is to give steady support, not to fight.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in

What did Varaha do?

Varaha is the third avatar. He comes as a boar.

The demon Hiranyaksha has pushed the earth under the cosmic ocean. Varaha rescues the earth.

This shows good winning over evil.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in

What did Narasimha do?

Narasimha is the fourth avatar. He is half man and half lion.

The demon king Hiranyakashipu had defied Vishnu. Narasimha kills him.

This shows how Vishnu protects his devotees and ends tyranny.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in

> **Quick check 1.** Kurma, the tortoise, killed a demon with his shell. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

The Next Six Avatars

What did Vamana and Parashurama do?

Vamana, the fifth avatar, is a dwarf Brahmin. He takes this short form to subdue the demon king Bali, who had gained control over the heavens. His story stands for humility and justice.

Parashurama, the sixth avatar, is a Brahmin warrior with an axe. He removes corrupt rulers and restores righteousness.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in

What did Rama and Krishna do?

Rama, the seventh avatar, is the prince of Ayodhya. People respect him for honour and loyalty. His story is told in the Ramayana. He fights the demon king Ravana.

Krishna is the eighth avatar. He is known for his teachings, including the Bhagavad Gita. He also plays a role in the Mahabharata.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in

Who is the ninth avatar?

In some traditions, the ninth avatar of Vishnu is Buddha. He is said to have come to teach compassion and non-violence, and to reform the social order.

So the common list has Buddha in the ninth place. The qualifier is useful. Not every tradition counts the ninth avatar in the same way.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in

What about Kalki?

Kalki is the tenth avatar. He has not appeared yet.

He is expected to come on a white horse and to carry a sword. He will arrive at the end of the current age.

His task is to restore righteousness and destroy the forces of evil.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in

> **Quick check 2.** Kalki, the tenth avatar, has already appeared. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

All ten at a glance

No.	Avatar	Form	What happens
1	Matsya	Fish	Saves the Vedas from a flood
2	Kurma	Tortoise	Holds up Mount Mandara in the ocean churning
3	Varaha	Boar	Rescues the earth from Hiranyaksha
4	Narasimha	Man-lion	Kills Hiranyakashipu
5	Vamana	Dwarf	Subdues the demon king Bali
6	Parashurama	Axe warrior	Removes corrupt rulers
7	Rama	Prince of Ayodhya	Fights the demon king Ravana

No.	Avatar	Form	What happens
8	Krishna	Cowherd	Teaches the Bhagavad Gita; role in the Mahabharata
9	Buddha	Teacher	Teaches compassion and non-violence (in some traditions)
10	Kalki	Rider on a white horse	Yet to come at the end of the age

Is there a pattern in the list?

The first avatars are water and animal forms. Later ones are human. The ten can be read as a gradual progress of life on earth, starting with water beings and ending in the human form.

This is a way of reading the list. It helps you remember the order.

Sources: maharashtratourism.gov.in

Dashavatar on the Stage

What is Dashavatar theatre?

Dashavatar is also the name of a folk theatre of Maharashtra and Goa. Farmers act in it. It is found in Sindhudurg in the South Konkan and in North Goa.

It has a history of about eight hundred years. It tells the stories of the ten avatars.

It is played at the yearly festival of the village deity.

Sources: sangeetnatak.gov.in

How is a play staged?

The play is acted after midnight in the temple grounds. It uses no technical props. Each character enters from behind a curtain held by two people.

The actors wear bright make-up and costumes. Three instruments play along: a paddle harmonium, a tabla and a zanj, which is a pair of cymbals.

Sources: sangeetnatak.gov.in

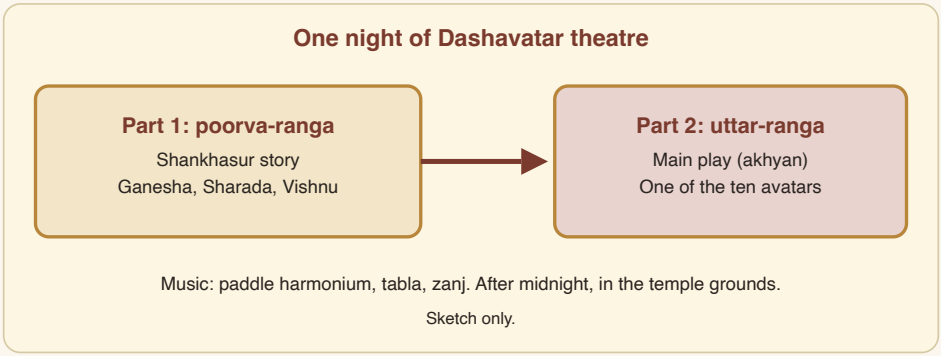
What are the two parts?

The play has two parts.

- **Poorva-ranga:** the first part. It tells the story of the demon Shankhasur. Ganesha, a Brahmin, Sharada and Vishnu appear.
- **Uttar-ranga:** the second part, also called akhyan. It is the main play and shows one of the ten avatars.

Shankhasur is not one of the ten avatars. He belongs to the first part only.

Sources: sangeetnatak.gov.in



The two parts of a Dashavatar folk play. Sketch only.

How Exams Ask About It

Exam trap

Exams usually test the order, not just the names. They may ask which avatar is fourth, or which comes just before Rama.

Learn the list as a fixed row: Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Kalki.

Also keep the two meanings apart. Dashavatara is the set of ten avatars. Dashavatar is also a folk theatre.

> **Quick check 3.** The Dashavatar folk theatre is performed in the Sindhudurg area of the Konkan. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick Q&A

- Which avatar is fourth? Narasimha.
- Which avatar held up Mount Mandara? Kurma.
- Which avatar is yet to appear? Kalki.
- Which avatar rescued the earth from Hiranyaksha? Varaha.
- What is the first part of a Dashavatar play called? Poorva-ranga.

Practice MCQs

1. What does the term Dashavatara refer to?

A. The ten Vedic rituals

B. The ten avatars of Vishnu

C. The ten Upanishads

D. The ten weapons of Shiva

See answer ↓

2. Which avatar of Vishnu holds up Mount Mandara during the churning of the ocean?

A. Kurma

B. Vamana

C. Varaha

D. Matsya

See answer ↓

3. Which avatar of Vishnu is half man and half lion?

A. Narasimha

B. Parashurama

C. Varaha

D. Vamana

See answer ↓

4. Which avatar of Vishnu rescued the earth from the demon Hiranyaksha?

A. Narasimha

B. Varaha

C. Kurma

D. Matsya

See answer ↓

5. Which of the ten avatars of Vishnu is yet to appear?

A. Buddha

B. Parashurama

C. Kalki

D. Krishna

See answer ↓

6. Which avatar of Vishnu, in the form of a fish, saves the Vedas from a great flood?

A. Matsya

B. Kurma

C. Vamana

D. Varaha

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.**
   Dashavatara means the ten avatars of Vishnu, the Hindu god of preservation.
   ↑ Q1
2. **A.**
   Kurma, the tortoise, supports Mount Mandara so that the gods and demons can churn the ocean for amrit.
   ↑ Q2
3. **A.**
   Narasimha is the half-man, half-lion avatar who slays the demon king Hiranyakashipu.
   ↑ Q3
4. **B.**
   Varaha, the boar, rescued the earth, which Hiranyaksha had submerged in the cosmic ocean.
   ↑ Q4
5. **C.**
   Kalki is the tenth avatar. He is expected on a white horse at the end of the current age.
   ↑ Q5
6. **A.**
   Matsya is the first avatar. He comes as a fish and saves the Vedas from a great flood.
   ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** Kurma held up Mount Mandara during the churning of the ocean. His role was support, not combat. ↑ 1
2. **False.** Kalki is yet to appear. He is expected at the end of the current age. ↑ 2
3. **True.** It is played by farmers in Sindhudurg, South Konkan, and in North Goa. ↑ 3

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