

हंस

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Sanskrit

Etymology

From Proto-Indo-Iranian (compare Avestan 𐬯𐬀 (*zā*)), from Proto-Indo-European **ǵʰans-* (compare English *goose*, Dutch *gans*, German *Gans*, Danish, Norwegian and Swedish *gås*), Old Irish *géiss*, Latin *ānser*, Latvian *zūoss*, Russian гусь (*gusʹ*), Albanian *gatë*, Ancient Greek χίψ (*khēn*)).

Noun

हंस (haṃsá) *m*

- a goose, gander, swan, flamingo (or other aquatic bird, considered as a bird of passage)
- sometimes a mere poetical or mythical bird, said in Rigveda to be able to separate Soma from water, when these two fluids are mixed, and in later literature, milk from water when these two are mixed
- also forming in Tigveda the vehicle of the Aśvins, and in later literature that of Brahmā
- the soul or spirit (typified by the pure white colour of a goose or swan, and migratory like a goose)
- sometimes "the Universal Soul or Supreme Spirit", identified with Virāj, Nārāyaṇa, Vishnu, Shiva, Kāma, and the Sun
- (in the dual)* "the universal and the individual Spirit"
- one of the vital airs
- a kind of ascetic
- a man of supernatural qualities born under a particular constellation
- an unambitious monarch
- a horse
- an excellent draught-ox (according to some, a buffalo)
- a mountain
- a temple of a particular form
- a kind of mantra or mystical text
- silver
- envy, malice
- name of two metres
- (music)* a kind of measure
- a mystical name of the letter 'h'
- a spiritual preceptor

Declension

Masculine a-stem declension of हंस

[show ▼]

Proper noun

हंस (Hamsá) *m*

1. name of a Deva-gandharva
2. name of a Dānava
3. name of a son of Brahmā
4. name of a son of Vasu-deva
5. name of a son of A-riṣṭā
6. name of a son of Brahma-datta and general of Jarā-saṃdha
7. name of various authors etc.
8. name of one of the Moon's horses
9. name of a mountain
10. name of the Brahmans in Plakṣa-dvīpa

Descendants

- Bengali: হাঁস (hās)
- Hindi: हंस (hans)
- Thai: หงส์ (hong)

References

- Sir Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English dictionary etymologically and philologically arranged with special reference to cognate Indo-European languages*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898, page 1286 (<http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/cgi-bin//monier/serveimg.pl?file=/scans/MWScan/MWScanjpg/mw1286-svocita.jpg>)

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Categories: Sanskrit terms derived from Proto-Indo-Iranian | Sanskrit terms derived from Proto-Indo-European | Sanskrit lemmas | Sanskrit nouns | Sanskrit masculine nouns | sa:Music | Sanskrit proper nouns

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Hamsa (bird)



A Hamsa sacred goose reliquary, stupa 32 of the Gangu group, Babar Khana, Taxila, Gandhara, 1st century CE. This Hamsa was found inside a granite bowl, with an inscribed gold sheet stating "Shira deposited the relics of her departed parents in the Hamsa". It has a cavity in the middle for the insertion of the relics. *British Museum.*^[1]

The **Hamsa** (from Sanskrit हंस *hamsa*) is an aquatic bird, often considered to be a goose or sometimes a swan. It is used in Indian and Southeast Asian culture as a symbol and a decorative element.

1 Identification

The word is cognate with Latin "(h)anser", Greek "χίην", German "Gans", English "goose", Spanish "ganso" and Russian "гусь" (all meaning a goose). Standard translations of the term from Sanskrit are as a goose first, and swans, other aquatic birds, or mythical birds as an alternative.^[2] It is normally considered by ornithologists to be most likely to be the bar-headed goose (*Anser indicus*), a migratory bird that is commonly found in winter in the north of the subcontinent.

While the term has traditionally been translated into English as *swan*, it is considered unlikely to be the original meaning. In India swans are never found in feral populations and hardly ever in zoos, though they occur occasionally as vagrants.^[3]

1.1 Identification with Brahman

Further information: **Soham** (Sanskrit)

The Hamsa represents perfect union, balance and life. A constant repetition of the word "hamso" changes it to "Soham", which means "That I am". Hence the hamsa

is often identified with the Supreme Spirit or **Brahman**. The flight of the Hamsa also symbolizes the escape from the cycle of **samsara**. The bird also has special connotations in the monistic philosophy of **Advaita Vedanta** - just as the swan lives on water but its feathers are not wetted by water, similarly an Advaitin tries to live in this material world full of **Maya**, but is unsoiled by its illusionary nature.

2 Mythology

A large volume of corpus of folklore and literature has grown around it, and a distinct mythology has evolved around the Hamsa. During Vedic times it was considered to relationship with **Surya**. Then, it signified strength and virility. With the emergence and consolidation of the Hindu scriptures of Upanishads, hamsa acquired more attributes, including being treated as a symbol of purity, detachment, divine knowledge, cosmic breath (prana) and highest spiritual accomplishment. Such a high level of symbolism was attached to hamsa as it transcends the limitations of the creation around it: it can walk on the earth (prithvi), fly in the sky, and swim in the water. The Hamsa was also used extensively in the art of Gandhara, in conjunction with images of the **Shakyamuni Buddha**. It is also deemed sacred in the **Buddhadharma**.

Lake **Manasarovar** in Hindu mythology, is seen as the summer abode of the Hamsa. Poetical images are derived from the flight of the swans to that lake in the **Himalayas**.^[4]

It is said to eat pearls and separate milk from water from a mixture of both. In many texts it is extolled as the king of birds. In one of the Upanishads, a hamsa is also said to possess the sacred knowledge of the **Brahman**. The hamsa is also the **vahana** of the goddess **Saraswati**.

3 Philosophy

A school of philosophy has endeavored to penetrate its name. *Ham-sa* when inverted reads as *sa-ham*, which in Sanskrit means *the oneness of human and the divine*. During pranayama, which is a yogic exercise of breath control, the inhalation is believed sound like *ham*, while the exhalation is believed to sound like *sa*. Thus, a hamsa came to epitomize the prana, the breath of life.

4 Paramhansa

In view of the association of a hamsa with several attributes as indicated above, saints and other holy persons are given the title of *paramhansa*, that is, the *supreme hamsa*. This title is affixed before the name and symbolizes that the particular person has reached a high level of spirituality and grace, though it may also be affixed as a postposition, for example, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.



Cambodia 1600-1800 AD, Silver Hamsa bird Coin (Fuang)

5 Contemporary usage

The name in other languages in which it is culturally important are Hindi: *hans*, Burmese: ဟံသာ, IPA: [hánθà], and commonly spelt *hintha* or *hinthar*; Mon: ဟံသာ, [hŋsa] or *hongsa*; Shan: ဟံသာ, [haŋ˥ sʰaː-] or *hong*; Thai: ห่าน, [hǎn]. The hintha (hamsa) is widely depicted in Burmese art, and has been adopted as the symbol of the Mon people. It is also depicted on the subdivision flags of Bago Division and Mon State, both of which have been historic Mon strongholds.

- Hamsa border on the Kanishka casket, 2nd century CE
- Hamsa birds between the architectural spires on the Bimaran casket, 1st century CE
- Flag of Bago Division, Myanmar, which depicts the hamsa
- Flag of Mon State, Myanmar, which depicts the hamsa

6 See also

- Greco-Buddhist art
- History of Buddhism
- History of Hinduism
- Lake Manasarovar

7 Further reading

- *The Goose in Indian Literature and Art* (Leiden, 1962) by J. Ph. Vogel

8 References

- [1] British Museum Collection
 - [2] “Sanskrit, Tamil and Pahlavi Dictionaries” (in German). Webapps.uni-koeln.de. Retrieved 2013-10-19.
 - [3] “ANSERIFORMES - Birds of India - Ducks, Geese, Swans”. Birding.in. Retrieved 2013-10-19.
 - [4] Kalidasa's maha-kavya *Raghuvamśa*
- *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend* (ISBN 0-500-51088-1) by Anna Dallapiccola

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9.1 Text

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