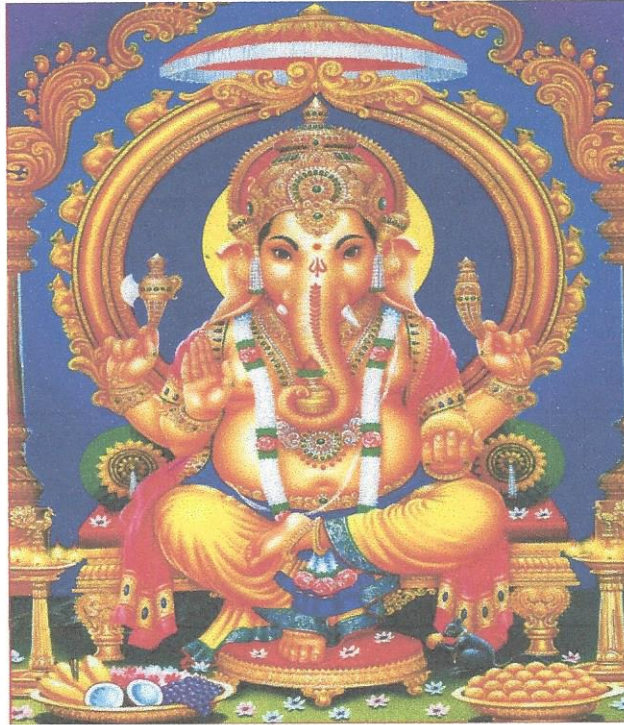# The Ganesh, the Minotaur and the Sphinx

The Ganesh

There are a number of stories about how Ganesh came to acquire an elephant head. Perhaps the most popular of these legends relates how Parvati, when she once took a bath, asked Ganesh, her son by Shiva, to stand guard. When her husband Shiva wished to enter the bathroom, he was opposed by his son. In his rage, Shiva cut off Ganesh's head.

Distressed by her husband's enraged behaviour, Parvati asked him to replace his head; and Shiva did so with the head of the first living being that he encountered, namely an elephant.

The sacred "Om" sign with which Ganesh is often associated points to yet another myth of his birth. According to this myth, one day Parvati saw the "Om" sign, and with her glance she transformed it into two elephants, from whose act of intercourse emerged Ganesh. They then resumed the form of "Om", but ever since "Om" became known as the sign of Ganesh.

Ganesh is a benevolent and revered figure and is the god of wisdom and learning.

The combination of a beast's head and human body is not restricted to just Hinduism.

The Minotaur

One of the Greek myths concerns the Minotaur (Minos King of Crete and Taurus the bull), who, unlike Ganesh, was a monster.

The story goes that after he ascended the throne of the island of Crete, Minos competed with his brothers to rule. Minos, prayed to Poseidon, the sea god, to send him a snow-white bull, as a sign of support (the Cretan Bull). He was to kill the bull to show honour to the deity, but decided to keep it instead because of its beauty. He thought Poseidon would not care if he kept the white bull and sacrificed one of his own. To punish Minos, Poseidon made Pasiphaë, Minos's wife, fall deeply in love with the bull. Pasiphaë had craftsman Daedalus make a hollow wooden cow, and climbed inside it in order to mate with the white bull. The offspring was the monstrous Minotaur. Pasiphaë nursed him, but he grew and became ferocious, being the unnatural offspring of a woman and a beast; he had no natural source of nourishment and thus devoured humans for sustenance. Minos, after getting advice from the oracle at Delphi, had Daedalus construct a gigantic labyrinth to hold the Minotaur. Its location was near Minos's palace in Knossos.

Androgeus, son of Minos, had been killed by the Athenians, who were jealous of the victories he had won at the Panathenaic festival. Others say he was killed at Marathon by the Cretan bull, his mother's former taurine lover, which Aegeus, king of Athens, had commanded him to slay. The common tradition is that Minos waged war to avenge the death of his son and won. Catullus, in his account of the Minotaur's birth, refers to another version in which Athens was "compelled by the cruel plague to pay penalties for the killing of Androgeos." Aegeus had to avert the plague caused by his crime by sending "young men at the same time as the best of unwed girls as a feast" to the Minotaur. Minos required that seven Athenian youths and seven maidens, drawn by lots, be sent every seventh or ninth year (some accounts say every year) to be devoured by the Minotaur.

When the third sacrifice approached, Theseus volunteered to slay the monster. He promised his father, Aegeus, that he would put up a white sail on his journey back home if he was successful, but would have the crew put up black sails if he was killed. In Crete, Minos' daughter Ariadne fell madly in love with Theseus and helped him navigate the labyrinth. In most accounts she gave him a ball of thread, allowing him to retrace his path. Theseus killed the Minotaur with the sword of Aegeus and led the other Athenians back out of the labyrinth. On the way home, Theseus abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos and continued. He neglected, however, to put up the white sail. King Aegeus, from his lookout on Cape Sounion, saw the black-sailed ship approach and, presuming his son dead, committed suicide by throwing himself into the sea that is since named after him - the Aegean Sea. This act secured the throne for Theseus.

The Great Sphinx of Giza
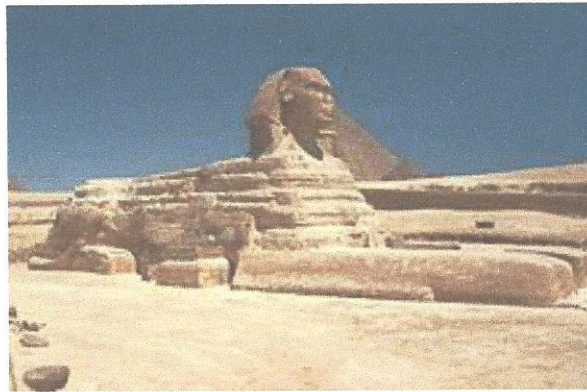
Then too there is the mythical Sphinx of Egypt.

In Greek tradition, it has the head of a human, the haunches of a lion, and sometimes the wings of a bird. It is mythicised as treacherous and merciless. Those who cannot answer its riddle suffer a fate typical in such mythological stories, as they are killed and eaten by this ravenous monster.

Unlike the Greek sphinx, which was a woman, the Egyptian sphinx is typically shown as a man (an androsphinx). In addition, the Egyptian sphinx was viewed as benevolent, but having a ferocious strength similar to the malevolent Greek version and both were thought of as guardians often flanking the entrances to temples.

(Courtesy of Wikipedia)

Inspector Rex