THE PERSISTENCE OF IMAGES:
MŪRTIS, MONOTHEISMS, AND MUSEUMS

by

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ABSTRACT

WILLIAM ROBERT BOWMER. The Persistence of Images: Mūrti, Monotheisms, and Museums. (Under the direction of DR. J. DANIEL WHITE)

Even anciently one finds debate among Indian sources as to whether image-worship is unacceptable, ignorant, tolerable, laudable or ideal as a means of connecting with divinity. Yet it has been ubiquitous in Indian society for thousands of years, though a contested activity whose exact antiquity remains disputed, and which survived in India's often-syncretistic religious milieu despite indigenous controversy and centuries of Muslim conquest before British colonial forces brought their own doctrinal and mercantile sensibilities to the debate. Although Western critiques encouraged some Indian intellectuals to adopt European categories and assumptions in rejecting image-worship as part of their indigenous heritage, India's sacred images have persisted. Once denounced as primitive idols, they have been reclaimed both for their sacralizing and aesthetic value, bringing us full-circle to India's ancient *rasa* aesthetic which, millennia ago, had first linked aesthetics and divinity and today reminds us that these images have retained a kind of agency despite colonial appropriation.

DEDICATION

To Drs. Stanley Wolpert and Mortimer Chambers of the University of California, Los Angeles, who as the very image of the scholar and gentleman launched me in my present direction many years ago.

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Fellow students William Branch and Gabrielle Haley were engaging colleagues and occasional discussants throughout my work on this document. Dr. Alexandra Kaloyanides responded to my arguments with thoughtfulness and care, helping me think better about the present and future dimensions of my study of the topics herein. Dr. Joanne Maguire Robinson was a continual voice of encouragement and moderation, helping me recognize my strengths and limitations as I progressed through several iterations of this document. Finally, my most profound thanks go to Dr. J. Daniel White, Jr., my thesis chair. This thesis does not do justice to the scholarship, knowledge and encouragement that Dr. White shared with me during its preparation. It is more than just a courtesy when I remind the reader that most of what is good about this thesis is due to the gracious influence of these and other scholars upon me. Any and all errors or insufficiencies, however, are my own.

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PREFACE

A thousand pilgrims strain
Arm, shoulder, breast and thigh, with might and main,
To drag that sacred wain,
And scarce can draw along the enormous load.
Prone fall the frantic votaries in its road,
And, calling on the God,
Their self-devoted bodies there they lay
To pave his chariot-way.
On Jaga-Naut they call,
The ponderous Car rolls on, and crushes all.
Through blood and bones it ploughs its dreadful path.
Groans rise unheard; the dying cry,
And death and agony
Are trodden under foot by yon mad throng,
Who follow close, and thrust the deadly wheels along.
—Robert Southey, *The Curse of Kehama*, XIV, 5.[1]

Though English-born poet Robert Southey, author[2] of the above verse, never visited India, his 1810 poem captures well the image many in England held of their colony to the east. India, they believed, was a place of blood-soaked and barbaric religion, where human beings made in God's image would eagerly sacrifice their lives in submission to a bloodthirsty idol.

Southey's chilling account of crushed worshippers beneath Jagannātha's image may seem alien to millions who have—whether in person or on film—watched the deity's cart run its course on Puri's streets during the annual Rathayatra festival. During British rule of India, however, such gruesome tales would often reach English eyes, as in this report of an accident occurring during a Rathayatra festival on June 19, 1822:

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[1] Robert Southey. *The Curse of Kehama* (London: Longman, 1810). 100.
[2] Southey is perhaps better known as author of a children's fairy tale, *The Story of the Three Bears* (1837), which formed the basis of the later tale known as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

Men, women, and children, all rushed in the moment the [temple] gates were thrown open. When they reached the square building next to the grand tower, they had to descend three steps, which were slippery from some holy food having been spilt; eighteen women were thrown down at the foot of the steps, and trampled to death by the crowd in the rear, before any assistance could be rendered.… whilst the temple was emptied of pilgrims, the dead bodies were removed with hooks and poles, and thrown over the boundary wall like so many dogs. The relations of the poor creatures were observed lamenting their untimely fate, and must have felt shocked at the mode of removing them from the temple.[3]

Significantly, however, a year after the above tragedy was reported, British civil servant Andrew Stirling gave his own account of the Rathayatra procession, in which he noted:

That excess of fanaticism which formerly prompted the pilgrims to court death by throwing themselves in crowds under the wheels of the car of Jagannáth, has happily long ceased to actuate the worshippers of the present day. During four years that I have witnessed the ceremony, three cases only of this revolting species of immolation have occurred, one of which I may observe is doubtful and should probably be ascribed to accident; in the other two instances the victims had long been suffering from some excruciating complaints, and chose this method of ridding themselves of the burden of life, in preference to other modes of suicide so prevalent with the lower orders under similar circumstances. The number of pilgrims resorting to Jagannáth has I think been exaggerated, as well as the waste of human life occasioned thereby, though doubtless, in an unfavorable season, or when the festival occurs late, the proportion of deaths caused by exposure to the inclemency of the weather, is very melancholy.[4]

Stirling's measured account stands in contrast to the alarmist British portrayals of Jagannātha's effect on the residents of Puri. But how did Indians themselves understand their traditions of image-worship? As we shall see in the following pages, Indians' relationships to their indigenous traditions of image-worship are complex, and became

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[3] "Juggernauth," *Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 17 (1824). 253.
[4] "On Orissa Proper," *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. XV (1825). 324–25.

even more complex when faced with critiques based on values drawn from European philosophy and Abrahamic religion. One striking phenomenon we shall explore is that although India's own traditions offered millennia of philosophical and textual material on which to base a critique of image-worship, it was not until Indians came face-to-face with British colonialism that those indigenous critiques intensified. Furthermore, those critiques often owed more to European categories and constructs than the Indian critics acknowledged—or perhaps even realized. Though Brahmo Samaj founder Rammohun Roy offered his own very personal translations of four of India's ancient *Upaniṣads*,[5] his writings express very directly a range of Anglophile sentiments that locate his critique outside of purely indigenous discourse. Perhaps more surprising is the hint of British influences, albeit unacknowledged, in the avowedly nationalist Indian iconoclasm of Dayananda Saraswati, founder of the Arya Samaj.

Faced with the wealth and might of British colonial power, it is perhaps understandable that some Indians would react defensively and deprecate their own traditions as inferior to those of their colonial masters. To the extent that Britain represented wealth and progress, British religion could be construed as an agent of that wealth and progress, thus casting aspersions on distinctive Indian religious practices disfavored by the British. Yet, with the growth of British colonial interest in the aesthetics of Indian iconography—appreciating it as art apart from its religious use— Indians found this aspect of their heritage favored again by their colonizers. To concerns of Orientalism or exoticism, we might offer the opinion of art historian Ananda K. Coomaraswamy:

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[5] *Īśā, Kaṭha, Kena* and *Muṇḍaka*, original compositions frequently dated toward the middle or late-middle of the first millennium BCE, published in English by Roy ca. 1816–19.

> The Hindus do not regard the religious, aesthetic, and scientific
> standpoints as necessarily conflicting, and in all their finest work,
> whether musical, literary, or plastic, those points of view,
> nowadays so sharply distinguished, are inseparably united.[6]

Through the lens of aesthetics, Indians and Indophiles could articulate their theories of image-worship not in defensive reaction to those taking it as something backward, primitive or even demonic, but rather as a sophisticated indigenous millennia-old theological complement to India's indigenous millennia-old theory of aesthetics. With this, we come full circle in our appreciation of India's attempt to come to terms with its historical traditions of image-worship.

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[6] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. *Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (London: T.N. Foulis, 1913). 17.

CHAPTER 1: Image-Worship Becomes Established in India

Image-worship emerges from India's antiquity. India's *rasa* aesthetic
informs the theory and practice of image-worship.

> If, firmly believing, as we do, in the omnipresence of God, we
> behold, by the aid of our imagination, in the form of an image any
> of His glorious manifestations, ought we to be charged with
> identifying them with the matter of the image, whilst during those
> moments of sincere and fervent devotion we do not even think of
> matter? If at the sight of a portrait of a beloved and venerated
> friend no longer existing in this world, our heart is filled with
> sentiments of love and reverence; if we fancy him present in the
> picture, still looking upon us with his wonted tenderness and
> affection, and then indulge our feelings of love and gratitude,
> should we be charged with offering the grossest insult to him—that
> of fancying him to be no other than a piece of paper?"[7]

Max Müller shares the above testimony from a Hindu resident of Benares, to help his

readers understand the thoughts of a nineteenth-century image-worshipper. But how and

when did image-worship come into being and develop over the millennia in India? How

has it been construed throughout its development? To many Western observers, image-

worship is synonymous with what the Abrahamic religions call idolatry, and it has been

associated with primitive and unsophisticated—even barbarous—conduct. But is

"idolatry" even a useful term in our study? As scholar Diana Eck has observed:

> Worshiping as God those "things" which are not God has been
> despised in the Western traditions as "idolatry," a mere bowing
> down to "sticks and stones." The difficulty with such a view of
> idolatry, however, is that anyone who bows down to such things
> clearly does not understand them to be sticks and stones. No
> people would identify themselves as "idolators," by faith. Thus,
> idolatry can be only an outsider's term for the symbols and visual
> images of some other culture.[8]

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[7] Friedrich Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, Vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1891). xvi-xvii.
[8] Diana L. Eck, *Darśan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). 21.

Indeed, questions of culture may loom large in how we understand India's traditions of image-worship. And the answers may not be so simple. Mircea Eliade reminds us:

> Idolatry and its condemnation are… attitudes that come quite naturally to a mind faced with the phenomenon of the hierophany; there is justification for both positions.… The assailants of idols, of whatever sort and in whatever religion, are justified both by their own religious experience and by the point in history when their experience occurs.[9]

And yet, though there may be justification for both positions, that justification comes and goes depending on the context in which worshippers understand the manifestation of the sacred. The same object viewed as sacred at two different points in its existence, may nevertheless be viewed very differently. Eliade describes this process:

> A sacred stone will manifest one modality of the sacred at one moment of history: this stone shows that the sacred is something other than the cosmic surroundings, and like stone, the sacred is absolutely, invulnerable, steadfast, beyond change. This expression of being (interpreted on the religious plane) in the stone can change its "form" over the course of history; the same stone may be venerated later on not for what it reveals directly (not, that is, as an elementary hierophany) but because it has become a part of some sacred spot (temple, altar, or some such), or because it is held to be the manifestation of a god, or for some other reason. It remains something other than its surroundings; it is still sacred in virtue of the primordial hierophany by which it was chosen, but the value attributed to it changes according to the religious theory in which that hierophany happens to fit at a given time.[10]

It is important to note that, not only may an image be reinterpreted over time, or its worship seen through a new philosophical or theological construct; different observers may at the same time interpret the act differently, depending on their relation to the act and their familiarity with the act in its indigenous context. A visitor from Britain,

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[9] Mircea Eliade. *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996). 25–26.
[10] Ibid. 25.

watching an act of temple worship in India, may normally and understandably construe it very differently than an indigenous worshipper. Again, we turn to Eliade:

> The Vaisnavite school of Indian mysticism gives the name *arka*, "homage", to all the material things people have been venerating for centuries (the *tulasī* plant, *śālagrāma* stones, or the idols of *Viṣṇu*), and as a result considers them all as epiphanies of the great God. The mystics and theologians, however, interpret this paradoxical epiphany as a moment of its dialectic when the sacred, though eternal, absolute and unfettered, manifests itself in a precarious and contingent material thing. When Viṣṇu thus becomes incarnate in a *śālagrāma* or an idol it has, in Vaiṣṇavite teaching, a redemptive purpose (in his great love for men, the god shows himself to them by taking on their inferior mode of being). But it also has a theological meaning: by becoming thus embodied the god reveals his freedom to take on whatever form he wishes, just as the sacred can, paradoxically, coincide with the profane without nullifying its own mode of being.[11]

One might dispute any number of specific details in Eliade's statement. For instance, his use of the word "incarnate" imparts to the discussion a Christian flavor not warranted by the Vaiṣṇavites' theory of *avatāra,* which may better be translated as "descent" of the deity.[12] Such a detail reveals in miniature the larger difficulty often faced in making such cross-cultural observations. And yet, Eliade's basic point remains useful, reminding us that *mūrti*-worship has behind it an ancient and nuanced philosophy—even though the typical worshipper may be as unacquainted with that philosophy as is the typical Christian who takes Holy Communion, or the Eucharist, without reflecting on transubstantiation or consubstantiation or any of the various theological notions and disputes over the "Real Presence" of God in the bread and wine.

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[11] Ibid. 28.

[12] Monier Monier-Williams. *A Sanskrit English Dictionary Etymologically and Philologically Arranged. (*Springfield: Nataraj Books, 2015). 90.

Similarly, even among Indian interpreters, an examination of the subcontinent's earliest history of image-worship may be colored by one's background and assumptions. For instance, a scholar who rejects the "Aryan invasion theory"—the reigning assumption, drawn from linguistic and archaeological evidence—that the composers of the *Ṛg Veda* entered India as invaders from the northwest—may be eager to demonstrate a continuity of culture from India's earliest archaeological finds to the present, even if this means making leaps of inference that the evidence may not warrant.

But what is the evidence? The study of Indian civilization in the last two hundred years has been complicated by the fact that Western scholars learned of India and its history in a manner quite different from their studies of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. Each of these latter civilizations had ancient records that were known to the modern civilizations. India's earliest history, extending to the centuries and millennia before the Vedic period (ca. 1500-500BCE), had been both contested and in large measure lost. Thus…

> …when the European antiquarians began to investigate Asia's past in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only the later traces of India's ancient history commanded their attention: the cities of the Mauryan Empire, where some centuries earlier the Buddha had lived, and the megalithic monuments of the south, with their striking similarity to prehistoric European tombs. The discovery of the Indus civilization in the 1920s, when excavations began at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, therefore took Europe by storm. The cities' well laid-out streets and fine houses with bathrooms surprised and impressed archaeologists and the public alike, while the discovery of seals bearing an enigmatic script intrigued them.[13]

With antecedents reaching back to the seventh millennium BCE town of Mergarh, 150 miles north of Mohenjo-daro, the Indus civilization sprang up along the Indus River from

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[13] Jane McIntosh. *The Ancient Indus Valley: New Perspectives* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2008). 4.

2500–1500BCE, with its peak ca. 2300–2000BCE. Extending to the town of Harappa, 400

miles to the northeast of Mohenjo-daro, the Indus civilization employed deftly

constructed granaries and sophisticated water management to complement its agricultural

economy. As one Indologist put it, he Indus civilization in the archaeological record

appears to be…

> …more advanced, sophisticated, and technologically advanced than the semibarbaric horde of Aryan invaders from the west, whose only "civilized" advantages seem to have been some superior weaponry and the use of harnessed horses.[14]

Another account describes Indus civilization thusly:

> The culture's sophisticated urban planning rivaled (and exceeded) its contemporaries in Egypt and Sumer/Akkad in an orderly, well-laid-out city design.… And, carefully laid out burial sites of corpses buried with objects of material culture suggest a sense of orderly transition between this world and another not-very-different world in which seeds, food, jewelry, and other implements were required for a proper other-worldly orderly existence.… those who gave a sense of direction to life understood that certain orderly requirements of a physical and devotional nature encouraged both harmony in this life and the next.[15]

Indeed, judging merely by archaeological findings, we have greater evidence of the

sophistication of the Indus civilization than we have of the subsequent Vedic civilization.

And yet, archaeology is nearly all we have to understand the Indus civilization. Its written

script, like Linear A some 3,000 miles to the northwest, remains undeciphered to this day.

[16] Without any ability to interpret the Indus script, we have only the culture's physical

artifacts from which to infer something about the religion of its people. One of the most

famous artifacts of disputed significance is a steatite seal found at Mohenjo-daro

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[14] Stanley A. Wolpert. *A New History of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). 14.
[15] J. Daniel White. "Harmony and Order in Indian Religious Traditions," in *Research in Human Social Conflict*, Vol. 2, 81–102. (Jai Press, 2000). 83–84.
[16] McIntosh (2008). 4.

depicting a seated central figure surrounded by animal images. Not long after finishing

his twenty-six-year term as Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India in

1928, Sir John Marshall in 1931 published an article associating the seal with the god

Śiva who is also described as Paśupati, "Lord of Beasts."[17] Not long after Marshall

published his findings, scholar Ramaprasad Chanda enthusiastically suggested that the

Harappa and Mohenjo-daro sites have…

> …brought to light ample evidence to show that the worship of
> images of human and superhuman beings in yoga postures, both
> seated and standing, prevailed in the Indus Valley in the
> Chalcolithic period. The evidence consists of seals bearing figures
> in yoga posture attended by votaries.[18]

Even to this day, some scholars who hold a Hindu religious or Indian nationalist

perspective retain Chanda's enthusiasm and see the so-called Paśupati Seal as Marshall

saw it, as a proto-Śiva whose presence establishes a link between the ancient religion of

the Indus civilization and the later religions of India. However, in the years since

Marshall's optimistic identification, many scholars have cast doubt on his analysis,

suggesting that the central figure on the seal might not, in fact, have three faces, might

not be seated in a yoga posture evoking Śiva,[19] and might in fact represent a seated bull,

not a deity or human being.[20]

In either case, there is nothing to indicate that the Paśupati Seal is anything more than

a seal, nor that it prescribes or depicts a mode of worship. Even if the seal might depict

figures that were otherwise and elsewhere objects of worship, the seal itself is merely an

image, not an image that received worship. Indian literature, like its archaeology, is

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[17] Sir John Marshall, *Mohenjo-daro and the Indus Civilization*, Vol. 1 (London: Probsthain, 1931). 52.
[18] Ramaprasad Chanda, *Medieval Indian Sculpture in the British Museum* (London: Kegan Paul, 1936). 261.
[19] Doris Srinivasan, "The So-Called Proto-Śiva Seal from Mohenjo-Daro: An Iconological Assessment." *Archives of Asian Art 29* (January 1, 1975). 47–58.
[20] Asko Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). 248–50.

replete with images that depict and give honor to their subjexts, but that are not

necessarily items of worship.

> In the *Pratimā-nāṭaka* of Bhāsa, mention is made of the statues
> (*pratimā*) of the departed royalties, which, though objects of
> respect, were not certainly meant for regular worship. The iron
> figure of Bhīma, which was crushed by the blind old Kuru king
> Dhṛtarāṣṭra by being hugged close to his body, is described by
> Kṛṣṇa as "*āyasī pratimā*" [*Mahābhārata*, Strīparva, Ch. 12, v. 23].
> The golden image of Sītā served as her substitute during the
> performance of the Aśvamedha sacrifice by Rāma, when she
> herself was in exile in Vālmīki's hermitage [*Rāmāyana*,
> Uttarakāṇda, Ch. 91, v. 25].[21]

This is not to say that there may not be continuities of various sorts between pre-

Vedic images and later image-worship. It is hard to look at the "Dancing Girl" figurine

from Mohenjo-daro (ca. 2500BCE) and not see in her angled neck, waist and knees an

echo of what later Indian iconographers would call the *tribhaṅga* pose, an "exaggerated

hip sway"[22] frequently found in depictions of Indian deities in a lifelike manner often

compared favorably to the weight-on-one-foot *contrapposto* pose (in which "one leg

bears the entire weight of the body"[23]) more favored by classical Western art. Yet this

similarity does not give us grounds to infer that this ancient figurine was the image of a

deity or an object of worship, any more than someone today might look at Leonardo

DaVinci's *Last Supper* and conclude that because it pictured Jesus it must be an object of

worship. Scholars and Indian nationalists who reject the suggestion that elements of

Indian culture were imported by conquering invaders in the second millennium BCE may

be sympathetic to such associations, as such similarities would tend to bolster their case

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[21] Jitendra Nath Banerjea. *The Development of Hindu Iconography*. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1974). 37.
[22] R. Siva Kumar and Manning, Eric. *Peter Briggs: Brouillon general* (Angers: Musee de Beaux Arts, 2016). 34.
[23] Olga Palagia, Pollitt, J.J, eds. *Personal Styles in Greek Sculpture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). 71.

for a continuous and unbroken history of Indian religion extending from the present back into the times recounted in India's epic literatures and histories (the *Itihasas* and the *Puranas*). Yet when we look closely at the *Ṛg Veda* and other Vedic-period literatures, we find at least some practices that do not seem obviously inherited from the Indus Valley civilization—including expressions about images and their worship.

In this regard, a few scholars claim to have identified passages in the *Ṛg Veda* that they interpret as describing the sale or purchase of an image of Indra. Two of these, in modern English translation, are as follows:

> [Indra's wife] Who buys this Indra of mine with ten cows, when
> he's going to smash obstacles? Then will he return him to me
> again?
>
> (IV.24.10)[24]

> Not even for a great exchange gift would I hand you over, you
> possessor of the stone, not for a thousand, not for ten thousand,
> you possessor of the mace, not for a hundred, you of a hundred
> rewards.
>
> (VIII.1.5) [25]

Far from describing financial transactions or the purchase of goods, each of these statements is just as easily seen—perhaps more so—as the speaker's assertion of Indra's value, far above money or wealth. Interestingly, though, some earlier translations of these passages may be more appealing to English-speakers who hope to find *mūrti* in the *Ṛg Veda*. Ralph T.H. Griffith's 1898 translation, for instance, in VIII.1.5 renders Jamieson-Brereton's "possessor of the stone" as "caster of the stone" and does not so plainly attribute IV.24.10 to Indra's wife.[26]

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[24] Stephanie W. Jamison and Brereton, Joel P., eds. *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). 598.
[25] Ibid. 1012.
[26] Ralph T.H. Griffith, trans. *Rig Veda* (Benares: E.J. Lazarus, 1896)

Jamieson and Brereton translate the intriguing word *śiśnadeva* in VII.21.5 as "phallus-worshipers"[27] while Griffith translates it as "lewd."[28] [29] But is the word simply a reference to those who ravenously pursue sexual activity? Or might it be a subtle deprecation of the Śiva *lingaṃ*—a phallic symbol of sorts, as a cylindrical stone with rounded top, sometimes adorned with art but other times left bare? Particularly for those who come to the debate with preconceptions of an unbroken indigenous historical tradition that never adopted the traditions of armies invading India, one might hope to find reference to *mūrti* in the Vedas, but not as an insult or deprecation. Whatever one's assumptions, without further evidence or context an association with Śiva may well be an anachronism or non-sequitur.

Furthermore, along with *śiśnadeva*, some scholars have taken references to the use of the word *mūradeva* as evidence of Vedic antipathy against image-worship, though the evidence is far from determinative. Regarding these two terms, Henrich von Stietencron observed:

> The Vedic terms *śiśnadeva* and *mūradeva* are not very clear. A *śiśnadeva* has been taken as somebody whose god is a phallus. In the word *mūradeva*, the Indian tradition relates the first part *mūra* to *mūla* (Kāśikā on Pāṇini 8.2.18) or *mūḍha* (Sāyana). Wackernagel accepting *mūla*: "root" compares it with German "Maul" (the root as the mouth of the tree; cf. Sanskrit *pādapa*: "drinking with its feet", tree. 1953: 329f.) Lüders, while classifying *mūradeva* as a Bahuvrīihi like *śraddhādeva* and *ānṛtadeva*, mentions Geldner's note to RV 10, 78, 2 and renders it as "dessen Götter die Wurzeln sind" = "whose gods are the roots" (1940: 364, n. 1). All this does not help to make the word *mūradeva* any clearer. Geldner himself translates "Götzenanbeter" = "worshipper of false gods" (RV 7, 104.24; 10, 87.2; 10, 87.14). I

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[27] Jamison and Brereton (2014). 909.
[28] Griffith (1898).
[29] Why the *lingaṃ* (penis) and not the *yonī* (vagina)? An adequate discussion of sexuality in Indian sacred texts would veer far afield of the focus of this brief look at Indian sacred images and their worship. As we shall see later, the erotic impulse does figure in the depiction of Indian sacred images, and unlike some traditions outside of India the feminine is present in powerful images of the feminine divine.

propose to derive the word from a root *mṛ/mūr*: "to coagulate", "stiffen" (variant of *mūrch, mūrchati* without sk-infix. On *mūrchati*, see Lüders 1940: 180) and connected to *mūrti*: "stiff body", "form". The word *mūra* (*mṛ > mūra*, like *pṛ > pūra, tṛ > tīra* etc.) might mean: "rigid", "stiff", "immovable". *Mūradeva* could then designate somebody "whose god is immovable" (Bahuvrīhi with accent on first member) or an "immovable god" (Tatpuruṣa with rare accent on first member, as the occurrence of the form *mūradevin* in the *Paippalāda Saṃhitā* suggests). In both cases, the word would refer to images which were possibly worshipped by the non-Vedic community.[30]

Indeed, even if the terms *śiśnādeva* and *mūradeva* indicate the presence of image-worship at the time the Vedas were composed, this does not require us to take those references as prescriptive; they may simply be descriptive—looking contemptuously on a practice performed by those not following the Vedas. This would be consistent with the notion that ritual-minded tribes invaded India from the north, encountering an indigenous population with vastly different customs—perhaps including image-worship.

One danger in using texts to make these inferences about image-worship is that there are not a few spurious texts masquerading as ancient. At first we may be tempted toward the idea of pre-Vedic *mūrti*-worship when we read such assessments as this one by Indian scholar Jitendra Nath Banerjea:

> That images of human beings were made in ancient India is fully proved by many other texts, one of which may be mentioned here. The *Śukranītisāra* says that "images of divinities, even if they are without the characteristic signs, are beneficial to men; those of mortals, on the other hand, even if they are endowed with them, are never so" [IV, 4, 36].[31]

However, upon closer examination, we find that *Śukranītisāra* includes such anachronistic detail as a description of fees for legal representation that matches closely

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[30] Heinrich von Stietencron, *Hindu Myth, Hindu History: Religion, Art, and Politics* (Delhi: Pauls Press, 2005). 53.
[31] Banerjea (1974). 37.

what was found in British colonial India.[32] Though some ancient literatures make

reference to a work known as *Śukranītisāra*, each of the different versions extant today

has been judged to be no earlier than colonial era in composition![33] But we should also be

careful in interpreting equally fervent expressions in the other direction, such as Max

Müller's assertion:

> The religion of the Vedas knew no idols. The worship of idols in
> India is a secondary formation, a later degradation of the more
> primitive worship of ideal gods.[34]

Here, we may legitimately wonder whether Müller is projecting a European binary—

Protestant aniconism good, Catholic/Orthodox iconography bad—onto his view of an

idealized India he wishes to admire. Let us not forget that, even in Vedic texts that show

no conclusive signs of approving image-worship, we do find a wide variety of

anthropomorphic details, among which those pertaining to the god Indra are prominent:

> Indra is referred to in many Ṛgvedic passages as *suśipra* (having
> beautiful cheeks and jaws), Rudra as *kapardin* (wearing braided
> coil of hair), Vāyu as *darśata* (striking to the eye, beautiful).[35]

 Clearly, these "ideal gods" of Müller's estimation are not quite so ethereal as not to

merit anthropomorphic physical descriptions that could offend those who envision a deity

beyond form or description. In any case, just as we have seen Banerjea interpret a text

credulously because it serves his purpose, we see Müller and other Western scholars

bringing their own presuppositions to bear in forming their conclusions, whether they do

so as Indophile or Indophobe. The former, comfortable using European and Christian

frameworks when looking at other cultures, imbue what might almost seem to be an

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[32] Ludo Rocher. *Studies in Hindu Law and Dharmaśāstra* (London: Anthem, 2012). 433.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Müller (1891). 37.
[35] Banerjea (1974). 44–45.

idealized Protestant ethic onto their perhaps-romanticized view of Indian culture at its best. The latter, using those same frameworks, often describe Indian religion in ways that evoke parallels with Old Testament accounts of the religions of Israel's enemies; we cannot help but be struck by the Israelite analogy used by an early British observer of the Rathayatra festival in Puri, Orissa:

> The idol called Juggernaut has been considered as the Moloch of the present age; and he is justly so named, for the sacrifices offered up to him by self-devotement are not less criminal, perhaps not less numerous, than those recorded of the Moloch of Canaan.[36]

But we shall return to these Western construals later. Though image-worship may be inferred prior to the *Ṛg Veda*, such inference is speculative. By the time of the epic poems Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābharata (mid- to late-first-millennium BCE) we find textual reference to the fashioning of images.

> In the *Pratimā-nāṭaka* of Bhāsa, mention is made of the statues (*pratimā*) of the departed royalties, which, though objects of respect, were not certainly meant for regular worship. The iron figure of Bhīma, which was crushed by the blind old Kuru king Dhṛtarāṣṭra by being hugged close to his body, is described by Kṛṣṇa as "*āyasī pratimā*" [*Mahābhārata*, Strīparva, Ch. 12, v. 23]. The golden image of Sītā served as her substitute during the performance of the Aśvamedha sacrifice by Rāma, when she herself was in exile in Vālmīki's hermitage [*Rāmāyana*, Uttarakāṇḍa, Ch. 91, v. 25].[37]

Yet whatever significance these images may have held, they are not images of divinity set aside for worship. Nevertheless, the first millennium BCE was a time of transition during which image-worship came to be commonplace, even standard, in Indian culture. One intellectual historian reminds us, regarding this transition:

> The practice of image-worship is manifestly non-Vedic, though there is ample evidence to show that it was current even in the

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[36] Rev. Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia* (London: Sidney, 1812). 22.
[37] Banerjea (1974). 37.

> sixth century B.C. It is difficult for us to say how this practice
> originated and which section of Indians was responsible for it. The
> conflict between the Vedic people and the image-worshippers
> seems to have been a long one; yet we know that even in the
> second century B.C., the Bhāgavata cult was in a very living state,
> not only in South India, but also in Upper India.[38]

Image-worship, whether or not even mentioned in the Vedas, was not part of Vedic religious practice, as we have seen. The image-worshippers, whoever they were, were an Other at the time of the Vedas. Yet, by the sixth century CE, India's upper classes that had formerly relied on the Vedic ritual rites had come to accept and practice image worship. We see this transition depicted, however obliquely, in the varying prescriptions given in a group of religious texts known as the *Upaniṣads*—mostly dated to the early half or middle of the first millennium BCE—which we can view as a kind of bridge between the earlier and later schools of Indian thought. Though a list in the *Muktika Upaniṣad* gives a list of 108 *Upaniṣads*,[39] perhaps a dozen or so are most prominent and widely cited. These texts document a transition from an older Vedic religious system based on sacrifice and social order to a newer system that incorporated worship and devotion, as well as asceticism. These texts are not a monolith; some encourage contemplation and gnosis of the impersonal force from which the gods are said to have sprung, while others either allow or endorse the worship of a personal deity.

As we shall see later,[40] four of these ancient texts[41] became valuable proof-texts for some of the most vigorous arguments of nineteenth-century Hindu iconoclasm. So, it is worth noting that within the larger corpus of *Upaniṣads* there are both texts that favor

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[38] Surendranath Dasgupta. *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 3. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). 19.
[39] Swami Nikhilananda. *The Principal Upanishads* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963). 21.
[40] see page 40.
[41] *Isha, Katha, Kena* and *Mundaka*

meditative reflection without images, and texts that encourage the use of images in worship. Consider Max Müller's translation of a passage from *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (5.1.1) and a later philosopher's commentary:

> That (the invisible Brahman) is full, this (the visible Brahman) is full. This full (visible Brahman) proceeds from that full (invisible Brahman). On grasping the fulness of this full (visible Brahman) there is left of that full (invisible Brahman). Om (is) ether, (is) Brahman. "There is the old ether (the invisible), and the (visible) ether of the atmosphere," thus said Kauravyāyanīputra. This (the Om) is the Veda (the means of knowledge), thus the Brāhmanas know. One knows through it all that has to be known.[42]

Can you wrap your mind around those pairs and contrasts, those perceptibles and imperceptibles? The Indian philosopher Śankara (788–820CE), commenting on this *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* text, acknowledged the benefit of images in grasping what is otherwise difficult or impossible to grasp:

> As the Highest self Who is the eternal Ākāśa, is not the object of eyes and other sense-organs, so He is not perceivable to the mind without the help of some suitable symbol (Ālambana) to support it. For this reason, He is envisaged or imagined with faith and devotion, in His best symbol ie., Onkāra just as god Visnu is envisaged by the people in His images made out of stone etc., having his limbs carved in them.[43]

Notice here that Śankara describes the image as a "suitable symbol" of the imperceptible divinity. Suffice it to say that Indian philosophers have engaged in vigorous disputes as to the nature of the "symbol." Is the image nothing more than a pointer meant to fix the worshipper's mind on the deity? Or, is the deity present in some manner either with or within the image? Contrary to what some observers may assume, image-worship does not rely on the worshipper's identification of the image with the

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[42] F. Max Müller, *The Sacred Books of the East, Vol. XV* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1884). 189.
[43] Adya Prasad Mishra, *The Development and Place of Bhakti in Śāṅkara Vedānta* (Allahabad: University of Allahabad, 1967). 93.

object of worship. Scholar Diana Eck quotes this passage from the ritual text *Visnu Saṁhitā*:

> Without a form, how can God be meditated upon? If without any form, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality[44] (XXIX.55–57).

Different traditions understand the meaning of "form" in different ways, but in any case we most readily associate image-worship with India's *bhakti* traditions, in which the worshipper seeks to cultivate particular emotions of attachment to a personal (or personalized) divinity. The wide variety of *mūrtis* are meant to evoke feelings of the love between a parent and a child, or of awe before a superior, or even feelings of fear or dread in apprehension of something seemingly grotesque.

It is understandable that some Indian iconography may be unfamiliar, and even unsettling, to the ordinary, untutored Western observer. Consider for a moment many depictions of the deities Narasiṃha and Kālī. These divine figures may at first evoke fear as we see them portrayed in their anger. We may feel fear at seeing the sharp teeth and claws of the man-lion deity Narasiṃha. We may feel revulsion and disgust at seeing depictions of the goddess Kālī in violent or chaotic settings filled with blood and death. Yet, in examining these figures carefully—noticing the clues and cues the artists provide to those who are familiar with the stories and the culture behind them—we can come to appreciate that even some seemingly unpleasant elements are appearing in narrative or historical contexts that can uplift the viewer even in the depiction of something unsettling. Consider that, to the devotee of Narasiṃha, the half-man, half-lion Viṣṇu-

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[44] Eck (1998). 45.

avatāra, there is no fear of the sharp claws that would disembowel the demon

Hiraṇyakaśipu. The fierce goddess Kālī, wearing a necklace of skulls whose blood drips

into her cup below them, is nevertheless an affectionate mother figure to her devotees.

These different reactions to an image—in this case, an image of a god or goddess—

are mediated through India's aesthetic theory of *rasa*. Rasa aesthetics govern many

aspects of traditional Indian art, from dancing to acting to painting to sculpting—

including the painting or sculpting of images for worship. Without understanding

something about *rasa*, our ability to understand India's traditions of image-worship will

be severely limited.

Rasa is a Sanskrit term that does not translate easily into English—from the *Monier-*

Williams Sanskrit Dictionary we might assume that "juice" or "flavor" or "taste" or

"essence" could come close.[45] One scholar defines it thusly:

> Rasa originally meant "sap", "essence", or "taste". Though it
> retains this original meaning, in the context of aesthetics it can
> perhaps best be translated as "dramatic sentiment" or "aesthetic
> enjoyment".[46]

Yet this enjoyment is not merely physical; it implies an emotional "tasting" of the

artist's work, an intellectual understanding of its context, and even a transcendent

spiritual experience evoked by the aesthetic encounter. Later Indian aestheticians would

sometimes point to an aphorism from the *Upaniṣads* (ca. 800–600 BCE) as revealing the

transcendent value of *rasa*:

> *raso vai sah*
> *rasam hyevayam labdhva~nandi bhavati*

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[45] Monier-Williams (2015). 869.
[46] Haberman, David. *Acting as a Way of Salvation*. 13.

> That which is known as the self-creator is verily the source of joy; for one becomes happy by coming in contact with that source of joy.
>
> —*Taittiriya Upanishad*, 2.7[47]

Other translations boil *raso vai sah* down even further, taking it to mean: "Brahman is bliss."[48] The earliest codification of *rasa* theory, *Natyashastra*, may have been composed as early as 500 BCE; most scholars place it somewhere between 200 BCE–200 CE. Later philosophers expanded the list of *rasas*, but *Natyashastra* itself, attributed to the legendary sage Bharata Muni, lists eight:

> In natya, eight rasas are recognized, viz. Srngara, Hasya, Karuna, Raudra, Vira, Bhayanaka, Bibhatsa, and Adbhuta. Brahma himself has mentioned these eight rasas.
>
> —*Natyashastra* 6:14.[49]

More specifically, of these eight *rasas*, four are primary and four are derived from the primary four:

> The source (i.e. basic) *rasas* are four: viz., erotic (*Śrngara*), heroic (*Vīra*), terror (*Raudra*), and disgust (*Bībhatsa*). Further, *Hasya* (humour) is derived from *Śrngāra* (erotic), *Karuna* (compassion, pathos) from *Raudra* (terror), *Adbhuta* (wonder or magical) from *Vīra* (heroics) and *Bhayānaka* (dread) from *Bībhatsa* (disgust). Humour results when love (erotic) is parodied (lit. imitated), a terrible thing or situation produces pity, a heroic deed appears marvelous (or almost magical) and anything disgusting or repulsive produces fright).
>
> —*Natyashastra* 6:39.[50]

The visual realm also came within the scope of *rasa* theory with its connection of particular colors to particular forms of divinity, a fact not just important in clothing dancers or actors in a play, but also in visual depictions of divinity. We find:

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[47] Swami Gambhirananda, translator. *Eight Upanishads*. 360.
[48] Rohit Mehta. *The Call of the Upanishads*.(Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007). 203.
[49] Adya Rangacharya, translator. *The Natyashastra: English Translation with Critical Notes*. (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2014). 54.
[50] Ibid. 56.

Srngara:	green	Vishnu
Hasya:	white	Pramatha
Raudra:	red	Rudra
Karuna:	gray	Yama
Vira:	wheaten	Mahendra
Adbhuta:	yellow	Brahma
Bibhatsa:	blue	Mahakala
Bhayanaka:	black	Kala

—*Natyashastra* 6:42–45[51]

Look closely at the above, and you will see some details that hint at the antiquity of

Natyashastra. Notice the presence of Rudra rather than Śiva in this list. Rudra was a god

within the Vedic pantheon (ca. 1500BCE), and *śiva*—an epithet meaning "kind" or

"benevolent" or "gracious"—was simply one of many descriptors of Rudra. As the Vedic

pantheon gave way to the gods of the epic poems and mythological histories, the Itihasas

and the Puranas (a shift largely completed in the early part of the first millennium CE),

Rudra came to be identified as an aspect or mood of Śiva, rather than the other way

around. As such, the presence of Rudra in this list hints at an original composition well

into the first millennium BCE. Further evidence of Natyashastra's antiquity can be found

in that, despite his later popularity, there is no reference to the god Krishna in this list

(though the "black" color associated with *bhayanaka* is described by the Sanskrit word

kṛṣṇa). Even if portions of *Natyashastra* were added as late as 200 CE, the above list hints

strongly at the text's early origins, when older deities were still favored and newer ones

had not yet come to their later prominence.

Later commentators such as Abhinavagupta (ca. 950-1016 CE) elaborated on the

foundation of *Natyashastra*, and today we commonly find ten primary *rasas*

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[51] Ibid. 56.

acknowledged, with *śānta* (peace) and *vatsalya* (parental affection) added to the above. Abhinavagupta's addition of *śānta* brought with it an important philosophical detail; in his system, *śānta* is the *mahārasa*—the topmost of the *rasas*—with *tattvajñāna* (knowledge of Truth) as its *sthāyibhāva* (essentially its "consequence").[52]

We can readily appreciate that the *rasas* evoke widely differing feelings in an observer. What, though, do they have in common? Consider:

> …*śrngāra* and *bībhatsa* have totally opposite directions. How can they lead to a similar creativity and similar aesthetic delight? The experience of disaster, fear and contempt generated by *karuna, bhayānaka* and *bībhatsa rasas* will ultimately lead to sublimity and grandeur from the poet's point of view…[53]

Indeed, many combinations of stimuli may come together to create *rasa* and the symptoms thereof. Of course, given their choice, it is safe to say that most people— Indian and non-Indian alike—would prefer to feel love (*shringara*), mirth (*hasya*), valor (*vira*), parental affection (*vatsalya*) or peace (*santa*), rather than fear (*bhayanaka*), anger (*raudra*) or disgust (*bibhatsa*). Nevertheless, as noted above with regard to the man-lion *avatāra* Narasiṃha, even these "unpleasant" emotions find their place in the iconography of *mūrti*. Yet this inclusion is not haphazard; just as the *Natyashastra* codified the aesthetics that underlie the portrayal of India's images, so too did other texts—known collectively as the *Śilpa Śastras* (Monier-Williams defines *śilpa* as "artistic work" or "form")—codify the depiction of India's deities as images for worship. What were these *Śilpa Śastra* texts?

> Hindus were in possession of numerous treatises on architecture, sculpture, which collectively are called the Silpa Sastra, but unfortunately few traces of them remain. There appears to have

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[52] Sureśacandra Pāṇḍe. *The concept of rasa: with special reference to Abhinavagupta*. (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 2009). 94.
[53] Ibid. 91.

been, according to some, thirty-two, and according to others sixty-four, standard treatises on the above-mentioned arts.[54]

Indeed, regulated by dozens of prescriptive texts, India's images—far from being random or arbitrary expressions—form a well-codified vocabulary to illustrate the myths and stories and aesthetics that connect worshippers with the divine. No matter how crudely or India's practice of image-worship may have begun, an elaborate philosophical and theological system grew up around it, whether or not the typical worshipper knew much or cared much about the lofty philosophy surrounding it. As Eliade reminds us:

> The idols of Viṣṇu existed long before we find the elevated theology and mysticism of a Lōkacārya; and, too, a devout Indian villager worships an *arka* for no other reason than because he thinks it embodies Viṣṇu. But the problem is to know whether this religious valuation of the idol—seen as sharing in some way or another in the essence of Viṣṇu—is not really saying the same thing as Lōkacārya—simply by giving a religious value to a material thing.[55]

 This tension between the obvious materiality of the *mūrti* and the believer's sense of its connection to divinity has again and again found itself at the heart of disputes about the appropriateness of image-worship. As Rudolf Otto reminds us:

> In neither the sublime nor the magical, effective as they are, has art more than an indirect means of representing the numinous.[56]

Some in India have been satisfied by the elaborate philosophy that gives meaning to image-worship. More have been satisfied by the simplicity of their experience. Still others have struggled with the tension—especially those whose religious impulse focuses on the oneness of God and not the many manifestations. As one twelfth-century Vīraśaiva

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[54] Vinayak Bharne and Krusche, Krupali. *Rediscovering the Hindu Temple: The Sacred Architecture and Urbanism of India* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). 256.
[55] Eliade (1996). 28.
[56] Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970). 68.

poet wrote:

> The pot is a god. The winnowing
> fan is a god. The stone in the
> street is a god. The comb is a
> god. The bowstring is also a
> god. The bushel is a god and the
> spouted cut is a god.
>
> Gods, gods, there are so many
> there's no place left
> for a foot.
>
> There is only
> one god. He is our Lord
> of the Meeting Rivers.[57]

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[57] A. K. Ramanujan, ed. *Speaking of Śiva* (London: Penguin, 1973). 84.

CHAPTER 2: Abrahamic Ambivalence

Conquering powers bring their iconoclasms to India. British
colonials influence India's religion and are influenced by it.

> None of the idols in Benares are handsome or attractive. And what
> a swarm of them there is! The town is a vast museum of idols—
> and all of them crude, misshapen, and ugly. They flock through
> one's dreams at night, a wild mob of nightmares.[58]

India's iconography has not always been at odds with Western sensibilities. Two

thousand years ago, to the town of Gandhara (in modern-day Pakistan), Greek armies and

traders brought not only commerce but also culture. As a result, much of Gandhara's

religious artwork in the first centuries BCE and CE reflected collaboration between Greek

or Greek-trained sculptors and local Indian artisans.[59] Gandharan images of the Buddha

owe a debt to this cross-cultural fusion, as the Indian figure of Gautama Buddha came to

be depicted with body, clothes and styling equally evocative of ancient Greece as of the

India of his birth.

Scholars have elsewhere noted a Buddhist tendency to incorporate into religious

artwork the symbols and figures of prior religious culture. We find Buddhist visual and

literary art, for instance, in which the Vedic deities Indra and Brahma are neither denied

nor rejected as powerful divine beings, yet are portrayed as paying homage to Gautama

Buddha upon his becoming a fully enlightened *arhat*.[60]

Islam and Christianity, however, have had a much more contentious relationship with

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[58] Mark Twain, *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World* (Hartford: The American Publishing Company, 1898). 504.
[59] S. Frederick Starr. *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). 84.
[60] Hans Wolfgang Schumann. *The Historical Buddha: The Times, Life, and Teachings of the Founder of Buddhism*. (London: Arkana, 1989). 185.

Indian iconography. Yes, one can point to liberalizing figures such as Akbar I (1542–

1605; reigned 1556–1605), the third Mughal emperor. Yet we notice Akbar I precisely

because he was such an exception to the general tenor of Muslim rule in India.   Even

before the establishment of the Islamic "Delhi Sultanate" in India in the early thirteenth

century CE, Persian Indologist Al-Biruni had offered a stark assessment:

> The Hindus totally differ from us in religion, as we believe in
> nothing in which they believe and vice versa.[61]

Armies of the Delhi Sultanate directed their iconoclastic efforts very specifically

against wealthy temples (with plenty of booty to be had) that were also politically

significant. To gain a sense of the mood of these iconoclastic conquests, consider this

brief passage from a contemporary report by an observer, describing the targeting of

temples in Cidambaram and Srirangam, considered the most important Shaivite and

Vaiṣṇavite centers in Tamil Nadu, by the Delhi Sultanate ruler Alauddin Khalji: [62]

> Through the favour of the Lord of men and jins, and assisted by the
> sincere motives of the Imam and the Caliph of the age, the
> orthodox Sunnī victors had now piously compelled all false houses
> of worship to bow their heads on the prayer-carpet of the ground
> and had broken all stone idols like the stony hearts of their
> worshippers. How clean the breasts of those who broke with
> greatest severity these contaminated stones, which Satan had raised
> like a wall before himself![63]

However much the ordinary desire to pillage and gain wealth may have played a

factor, the iconoclastic impulse provided moral justification and satisfaction for these

monotheistic conquerors in ravaging their foes' most sacred places. Of course, temples

and the image-worship within them persisted throughout the centuries of Muslim rule in

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[61] E. C. Sachau, trans. *Al Biruni's India* (London: n.p., 1910). 19.
[62] Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). 127.
[63] Muhammad Habib, trans. *The Campaigns of Alā u'd-dīn Khiljī, Being the Treasures of Victory of Hazrat Amīr Khusrau* (Bombay: D.B. Taraporewala Sons, 1931). 107.

India, and Muslim kings maintained uneasy relations with their nation's temple traditions. A widely told story credits Akbar with donating stone from his famous Red Fort in Agra to aid in the construction of Vrindavan's Govind Dev temple. Yet the seventh Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb, is credited with plundering that same temple and demolishing its top four floors to leave just the present three-story structure.

Akbar, the third Mughal emperor and a reformer and idealist in religious matters, had established his own short-lived syncretistic faith (later called *Din-i Ilahi*), with its own meeting house known as the Ibadat Khana (literally, "House of Worship"). Interestingly, in Akbar's regal chronicle *Akbarnama*, we find a painting of the Ibadat Khana depicting not a place of ritual worship but rather a place of debate, where participants brought their books to engage in discussions with Akbar. In any case, Akbar's new religion was a personal affair that may have had fewer than twenty adherents—all within the royal household.

Akbar's new religion more or less died with him, though as a measure of his importance Indologist F. Max Müller credited the emperor as "the first who ventured on a comparative study of the religions of the world."[64] Later scholars such as David Chidester have observed that although it required an emperor to carry out such an extensive project as Akbar attempted, it was not until the far greater imperial power of Britain exerted itself in the field of comparative religion that nineteenth century Western scholars had easy access to religious texts that, in Müller's words, "neither the bribes nor the threats of Akbar could extort from the Brahmans."[65] As Chidester describes:

> Where Emperor Akbar had failed, the East India Company
> succeeded in securing the text of the Vedas. With the company's

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[64] F. Max Müller. *Introduction to the Science of Religio*n (London: Longmans, 1873). 68.
[65] Ibid. 23.

financial support, Max Müller was able to translate that sacred text for the study of religion. If Emperor Akbar was the founder, he represented a model for the merger of knowledge and power in British imperial comparative religion.[66]

In any case, in looking at British reports of religious India, it is not the accounts of ornate *masjids* that draw our attention. Muslim houses of worship did not draw the same opprobrium that we find in British accounts of Hindu image-worship. Consider this account by a traveler visiting Varanasi, roughly five hundred miles southeast of Delhi, during the later years of Akbar's reign:

> …they have their images standing, which be evil favoured, made of stone and wood, some like lions, leopards, and monkeys; some like men and women, and peacocks; and some like the devil with foure armes and 4 hands… and in diverse places there standeth a kind of image… they call Ada… this Ada hath four hands with clawes… they have in some of these houses their idoles standing… many of them are blacke and have clawes of brasse with long nayles, and some ride upon peacocks and other foules which be evil favoured… none with a good face.[67]

"Evil favoured" images "like the devil"—none "with a good face." Such descriptions were not uncommon in British accounts of India's image-worship, and were useful tools in fanning sentiment for the support of missionaries to India. In the words of scholar Brian Pennington:

> …the evangelical missionary's confrontation with the Hindu idol encoded so many other contrasts critical to the crystallization of a British sense of national self: reason vs. irrationality, Christian vs. pagan, minds vs. body, freed vs. enslaved, and so forth.[68]

The *mūrti* became emblematic of what Western missionaries fought against. The same image that to the indigenous worshipper brought comfort and connection with the

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[66] David Chidester. *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). 2.
[67] W. Foster, *Early Travels in India* (London: n.p., 1921). 15.
[68] Brian Pennington. *Was Hinduism Invented?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). 59.

divine became in Western Christian eyes a symbol of the degradation of a nation, viewed

through a prism of Europe's own history:

> The tendency was to liken Hindu medievalism to European
> medievalism and to maintain that Brahmans, like the European
> monks, kept their peoples in darkness by substituting superstition
> for religion and by stifling intellectual curiosity that might lead to
> scientific knowledge. Just as Europe liberated itself by reviving its
> classical literature, so might Hindu India do the same.[69]

This should not surprise us, given both the history of Europe and the Abrahamic

religious context the missionaries brought to their Indian assignments, which gave a

textual and theological justification for any aesthetic abhorrence they may have felt. In

some cases, observers assumed a literal correspondence between India's religious history

and the West's:

> India was seen by Europeans not only as exotic and bizarre but as a
> kind of living museum of the European past. In India could be
> found "all the characters who are found in the Bible" and the
> "books which tell of the Jews and other ancient nations." The
> religion of the Gentoos was described as having been established at
> the time of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and preserved by
> Noah; or the religion of "the seed of those who revolted against
> Moses" and the worshipers of the "molten calf." The Brahmans
> were Levites or Nazarites; Jains, Rehabites. Indians were, for some
> Europeans, the direct descendants of one of the lost ten tribes, for
> others the manner and customs of Indians derived from the ancient
> Egyptians who were the descendants of Ham, the son of Noah.[70]

In short, "Europeans knew the world through its signs and correspondences to things

known."[71] Scholar Geoffrey Oddie reminds us of the European missionary perspective,

colored by European observers' religious sensibilities:

> Increasing their sense of repugnance at what appeared to be idol
> worship was their reading of the book of Kings, referring to the
> sacrifice of sons and daughters to the god Molech—a custom

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[69] David Kopf. *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). 103.
[70] Bernard S. Cohn. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).78.
[71] Ibid. 79.

practiced by Semitic people—which reinforced the view that idol worship encouraged the rise of cruel and barbaric practices.[72]

Indeed, European descriptions of India's temples drew heavily on archetypes not just from the Old Testament accounts of idol worship but also from Christian notions of Satan and other devils.

> They are indeed of a belief, that there is but one God…yet does not this persuasion hinder, but that they worship the Devil… The figure under which they represent him is dreadful to look on. The Head, out of which grows four Horns, is adorn'd with a triple Crown, after the fashion of a Tiara. The countenance is horribly deformed, having come out of the Mouth two great Teeth, like the Tusks of a Boar, and the Chin set out with a great ugly Beard. The Breasts beat against the Belly, at which the Hands are not absolutely joyned together, but seem negligently to hang down. Under the Navil, between the Two Thighs, there comes out of the Belly another Head, much more ghastly than the former, having two Horns upon it, and thrusting out of the Mouth a filthy Tongue of extraordinary bigness. Instead of Feet it has Paws, and behind, a Cows-tail.[73]

As we saw earlier, India's *rasa* aesthetic does not exclude imagery that may induce horror, fear, or disgust. Yet the *rasa* aesthetic assumes that the artist and the viewer will share a common context allowing the intended *rasa* to be tasted. Consider, for a moment, how an untutored observer might react to the sight of people worshipping in front of a crucifix. On that crucifix is a male figure with blood racing forth from gruesome wounds on top of the wounds left from a severe whipping. The figure's face has what may seem to be a sad countenance, and is slumped in a manner suggesting his imminent death. Yet, in front of this image, worshippers may be experiencing a range of very positive emotions, from gratitude to beatitude. How odd and alien—how barbaric—might this

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[72] Geoffrey Oddie. *Imagined Hinduism* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006). 25.
[73] J. Davies. *The Voyages and Travels of the Ambassadors (1633-39)* (London: n.p., 1669). 52.

seem to someone unaware of the context of the image and the emotions it might invoke? With that in mind, what might we infer from the above-described image? It has paws and a tail. It has some manner of beard. It has two sharp teeth and a prominent tongue. While this could be any number of deities poorly described by a shocked European visitor, the description is not inconsistent with that of the man-lion *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, known as Narasiṃha, who is often portrayed in a gruesome form befitting one of his most celebrated feats. The story is told that an evil king named Hiranyakaśipu received a boon that made him almost indestructible, as he could not die inside or outside of any residence, nor during the daytime or nighttime, neither on the ground or in the sky, nor by any weapon, nor by any human being or animal.[74] The emboldened Hiranyakaśipu then demands to be treated as God by those around him, and becomes enraged when his own son Prahlad prefers to worship Viṣṇu. Before Hiranyakaśipu can strike out in rage against his son, the *avatāra* Narasiṃha emerges at twilight (neither day nor night) from a pillar in the courtyard (neither inside nor outside), and throws Hiranyakaśipu on his lap (neither ground nor sky) to disembowel the evil king (with his sharp nails, not with a weapon) to protect the young boy.

The point of recounting this tale is simple: just as a Christian may look at a crucifix and not feel revulsion at a horrific depiction of God, so too can a worshipper of Narasiṃha look upon a scene depicting blood and guts and suffering, yet see in it the reassuring story of God protecting a worshipper. We would do well to keep that in mind when considering accounts of the gruesomeness of Indian *mūrti*-worship, as without such context we may interpret credulously reports such as the following from a European

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[74] *Bhagavata Purana* VII.8.1-33.

traveler, Ludovico de Varthema, describing a temple he visited while touring southern

India from 1503–1508:

> In the midst of this chapel there is a devil made of metal. The said
> devil has a crown made like that of the papal kingdom, with three
> crowns; it has also four horns and four teeth with a very large
> mouth, nose, and most terrible eyes. The hands are made like those
> of a flesh-hook and the feet like those of a cock; so that he is a
> fearful object to behold. All the pictures around the said chapel are
> those of devils, and on each side of it there is a Sathanas seated in a
> seat, which seat is placed in a flame of fire, wherein are a great
> number of souls, of the length of half a finger and a finger of the
> hand. And the said Sathanas holds a soul in his mouth with the
> right hand, and with the other seizes a soul by the waist.[75]

Again, we do not know precisely which Indian images evoked thoughts of Satan in

this traveler's mind. Yet, when we read of an image holding one figure in its mouth while

holding another figure by the waist, we may remember that in depictions of the above-

described Narasiṃha story we often see Prahlad held in Narasiṃha's loving embrace by

one hand, even while another hand is disemboweling Hiranyakaśipu. Whatever image so

disturbed di Varthema may have been an image that gave solace to those who knew the

story behind whatever was depicted, yet he could only see it through his Western context.

Eighty years after di Varthema's account, sometime between 1583–1588, another

European traveler gave an account that we may find instructive, as it is clearly rooted in

European conflict as much as in the details of the southern Indian image being described:

> So misshaped and deformed, that more monstrous was never
> seene, for it had many hornes, and long teeth that hung out of his
> mouth down to the knees, and beneath his Navel and belly it had
> an other such like face, with many hornes and tuskes… Upon the
> head thereof stoode a [three-crown] Myter, not much unlike the
> Popes triple crown, so that in effect it seemed in the 'Apocalips'.[76]

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[75] J. W. Jones. *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema* (London: n.p., 1843). 137.
[76] A. C. Burnell. *The Voyage of J.H. van Linschoten* (London: n.p. 1885). 300.

This mention of "the Pope's triple crown" says much about the preconceptions that Protestant viewers brought to their interpretations of Indian images. With this in mind, we should take a moment to acknowledge that Roman Catholic explorers held similar views of non-Christian images they encountered in their travels—and not just in India. Geoffrey Oddie reminds us, citing a scholar of Christian history:[77]

> Antipathy towards the worship of idols was not however the prerogative of and preserve of Protestants alone. As Brian Stanley remarks, determination to extirpate "pagan idolatry" was a dominant motif in the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of Central and South America and was, if anything, "even more sweeping than in later Protestant missionary thought."[78]

As we have seen, some British Indophiles drew a distinction between the religious practices of India's people (which they considered primitive) and the philosophical tradition of India's religious texts, which they believed would civilize India if better known and observed. David Kopf quotes British Sanskritist A.B. Tod, who in his *Primitiae Orientales* (1804) opined that, just as Europe reinvigorated its culture upon rediscovering the classical works of ancient Greece and Rome:

> …the same happy consequences would be the result arising from the translation of Sanscrit works; particularly as it is supposed that they contain many contradictions concerning their present Deities and Devotions. When these circumstances shall have been made manifest to the people, is it not possible that they might forsake and relinquish many of their foolish and idolatrous prejudices and when once this chief obstacle is removed, they might progressively advance in the pursuit of knowledge and learning.[79]

Should we accept this uncritically as a seemingly positive assessment of India's Sanskrit literatures, as tools to aid in the uplift of India's peoples? Historian Edward Said

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[77] Brian Stanley. *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 2001). 9-10.
[78] Oddie (2006). 25.
[79] Kopf (1969). 104.

reminds us that Tod's approach is consistent with a recurring theme among British intellectuals seeking to understand their colonies and the world around them.

> Language and race seemed inextricably tied, and the "good" Orient was invariably a classical period somewhere in a long-gone India, whereas the "bad" Orient lingered in present-day Asia, parts of North Africa, and Islam everywhere.[80]

For a few British Indophiles, romanticized notions of Sanskrit and ancient India essentially took the place of Hebrew and ancient Israel[81] when Christianity no longer suited their worldview. This was of course a great shock to the sensibilities of most Britons; Kopf reminds us of the shock caused by the publication of *Vindications of the Hindoos by a Bengal Officer*, which proclaimed unashamedly its support for Hindu civilization, at least as idealized by the writer, who suggested that mass conversion of Hindus would fail, because…

> on the enlarged principles of moral reasoning, Hinduism little needs the meliorating hand of Christianity to render its votaries a sufficiently correct and moral people for all the useful purposes of a civilized society.[82]

Another British officer who had served in Bengal and come to appreciate much of its indigenous culture scandalized many in England with his published apologia for indigenous Indian customs of worship:

> While they reverence statues, they consider the inferior beings whom they represent, only as agents of the Supreme, as mere guardians, as inspectors of human actions; but the Hindoos know that their agency is limited; that, at the appointed time, they must vanish into air; and that God alone is permanent. Did the Greeks reason thus when they put Socrates to death for disparaging their gods? Socrates would not have experienced such treatment from the Hindoos. On the contrary, they would have granted him, that these gods were only transitory beings; but, perhaps, they would

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[80] Edward Said. *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). 99.
[81] Ibid. 137.
[82] Kopf (1969). 140.

> have added, as a Hindoo once said to me at Canouge, "I acknowledge the Unity of God, and that he should be contemplated, in abstract meditation, with a mind undiverted by worldly considerations… the goodness of the Deity has therefore permitted us, at stated times, to form in our minds a conception of his essence; to fix the wandering attention by some corresponding visible object, and to adore him in that quality."[83]

Such Indophiles were seemingly in the minority, however, judging by the controversy that surrounded the conduct of the British East India Company regarding oversight of temples within the lands it controlled. Despite missionaries' abhorrence of Indian temple activities, the East India Company's mercantile aspirations introduced a complicating factor into the relation between temple worship and colonial oversight. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, after the East India Company had extended its influence over wide swaths of the subcontinent, a substantial source of yet-untapped revenue became apparent. We read:

> British officials were aware of the important role certain Hindu images and temples played in the indigenous culture and the construction of political authority. Accordingly, colonial officers actively placed themselves within the ambit of Hindu temples. They collected and redistributed temple revenues, arbitrated disputes over religious prerogatives, administered religious endowments, renovated decrepit structures, gave presents to the deity, and participated publicly in major temple festivals. In short, they vigorously adopted the traditional role of Indian sovereigns.[84]

Consider the message this sent to Indians. Some of the colonial British approached Indians as missionaries, extolling the glories of Christian faith in opposition to Indians' millennia-old temple customs. Now, other British colonial faces appeared as benefactors

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[83] John Scott. *A Vindication of the Hindoos, Part the Second* (London: Black et al., 1808). 85–87.
[84] Davis (1997). 203.

of the temples—and even as revenuers collecting "pilgrim tax"[85] and thus benefitting

from the pilgrims' religious activities.

East India Company leaders would even take pains to secure the acquiescence of a

region's *mūrtis* (and their temple caretakers) before attempting a military conquest.

During preparations for Lt. Colonel Lionel Campbell's 1803 invasion of Orissa,

Governor-General Richard Wellesley gave orders prescribing the etiquette to be observed

regarding Jagannātha in Puri:

> On your arrival at Juggernaut, you will employ every possible
> precaution to preserve the respect due to the Pagoda, and to the
> religious prejudices of the Brahmins and Pilgrims. You will
> furnish the Brahmins with such guards as shall afford perfect
> security to their persons, Rites and Ceremonies, and to the sanctity
> of Religious Edifices, and you will strictly enjoin those under your
> Command to observe your orders on this important subject with
> the utmost degree of accuracy and vigilance.[86]

Whether an act of divine sanction or simply the canny instincts of overmatched

temple proprietors, the British received a favorable response, as one officer reported back

to Wellesley:

> The Brahmins at the holy temple had consulted and applied to
> Juggernaut to inform them what power was now to have his temple
> under its protection, and that he had given a decided answer that
> the English government was in future to be his guardian.[87]

Jagannātha having announced approval of his future protectors, no resistance met the

British entering Puri. But was this merely an administrative arrangement that did not

confer or imply British approval of the image-worship taking place within Jagannātha's

temple? Certainly India's temples could be lucrative sources of income for the East India

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[85] Select best reference to pilgrim tax collection.
[86] Davis (1997). 203.
[87] Ibid.

Company, and for a time the logic of profit prevailed. However, there were limits to

what England would accept. As Richard Davis explains:

> When officers at the East India Company sponsored temple
> reconstruction, engaged in ritual exchanges with Hindu temples,
> and presided over Hindu festivals, were they not implicitly
> accepting the premises of temple Hinduism? In a practical sense,
> they were placing themselves in the role of royal dispensation to a
> Hindu god. It was this apparent complicity with the Hindu
> dispensation that opened Company officials to attack on their
> Christian flank, as participants in "idolatry."[88]

Edward Lord Law, Earl of Ellenborough, had made grand plans as Governor-General

of the East India Company in 1842 to restore the Gates of Somanātha, plundered (though

some Muslim sources dispute this point) in an eleventh-century Muslim raid. While his

plans were delayed, they fell under the scorn of the House of Commons. Member of

Parliament Thomas Babington Macaulay delivered a speech on March 9, 1843, in which

he asserted:

> The charge against Lord Ellenborough is that he has insulted the
> religion of his own country and the religion of millions of the
> Queen's Asiatic subjects in order to pay honour to an idol.[89]

Finally, the embarrassment of profiting from non-Christian worship had become too

much to bear, and the British Parliament insisted on colonial separation from India's

indigenous religious life. Ellenborough's failed attempt to restore the Somanātha Gates

serves as a good marker of the effective end of British attempts to gain profit and

legitimacy within existing Indian polity by acting in support of Indian *mūrtis* in their

temples.[90] What was the consequence? As Richard Davis suggests:

> For British colonial society, withdrawal from temple activities was
> another step in its self-transformation into a ruling caste, remote

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[88] Ibid. 205.
[89] *The Life and Works of Lord Macaulay, Complete, Vol. VIII* (London: Longman's, 1908). 231.
[90] Davis (1997). 203.

and isolated but secure in its conviction of racial superiority. Yet it also left them without clear means of articulating and symbolizing their authority to rule India.[91]

How did Britain's ceding of religious governance, and its ambiguous and ambivalent interactions with India's many deities, affect the religious thought of some members of India's own educated classes? We shall examine this briefly in the next chapter.

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[91] Ibid. 207.

CHAPTER 3: Indigenous Iconoclasm

Western monotheism inspires some Indians to iconoclasm, but even as "Hinduism"
is defined its definers differ regarding the place of their indigenous traditions.

Ram Mohan Roy (1772[92]–1833) laid the philosophical foundation for what became the
Brahmo Samaj movement, which among its tenets included a staunch rejection of *mūrti*-
worship. As we saw earlier, there are texts within the *Vedas, Upanisads* and various
Dharma-Shastras that can be cited in support of an iconoclastic mode of worship. Yet,
when we examine Roy's writings, we find an important nuance. Though educated in
Vaiṣṇava, Shakta and Muslim traditions early in life, before his exposure to Christianity,
his iconoclasm is neither that of an orthodox Hindu nor that of a Muslim or a Christian.
Indeed, though in his dealings with English-speakers he often presented his argument as
an appeal to an ideal or ancient Hindu philosophy now lost, we find his argument neither
Abrahamic nor Hindu, but rather an idiosyncratic synthesis of his influences.

Roy was born in the village of Radhanagar, in what is today West Bengal. From his
youth he was exposed to varieties of faith, as his mother Tarini Devi was a Shakta while
his father Ramakanta was a Vaiṣṇava devoted to Rama.[93] Roy's earliest education
exposed him to Persian culture and philosophy, and his biographers report that at age
sixteen he clashed with his parents over the family's practice of image-worship.[94] It
would thus be reasonable to expect that Roy's later development might find him in
sympathy with iconoclastic ideals. Indeed, his hagiographers present him as a cross-

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[92] Acknowledge debate/ambiguity about birthdate.
[93] Abidullah Al-Ansari Ghazi. *Raja Rammohun Roy: Encounter with Islam and Christianity and the Articulation of Hindu Self-Consciousness* (New York: Xilibris, 2010). 39.
[94] Stephen N. Hay, ed. *Dialogue Between a Theist and an Idolater: Brahma Pauttalik Samvad—An 1820 Tract Probably by Rammohan Roy* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1963). 15.

cultural figure; one Brahmo Samaj biography opines that "if he was a Hindu with the Hindus, he was also a Mohammedan with the Mohammedans and a Christian with the Christians."[95] Indeed, today's Brahmos and their sympathizers give Roy great credit for what they see as kind of cross-cultural resonance and synthesis in his works. One of Roy's biographers suggests that:

> …there were three bodies of culture, three civilizations which were in conflict—the Hindu, the Moslem, and the Christian or Occidental; and the questions was—how to find a point of rapport, of concord, of unity, among these heterogenous, hostile and warring forces. The Raja by his finding of this point of concord and convergence became the Father and Patriarch of a modern India—an India with a composite nationality and a synthetic civilization.[96]

The reality, unsurprisingly, is much more complex. Not only has India gone through much turmoil since the generous assessment by his biographer above; we may reflect on how the partitioned Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, each still scarred by interreligious conflicts, speak to the absence of, need for, or impossibility of, Roy's vision. In any case, Roy's writings suggest that he did not view the Hindu, Muslim and Christian "bodies of culture" with equal vision. In one of Roy's earliest works, the *Tuhfat ul Muwahaddin*, written in Persian in 1803, Roy's critique of religious superstition has what even a sympathetic Muslim biographer calls "a special anti-Muslim bias."[97] We read:

> It is more strange that their [Muslims'] *Mujitahids* or religious expounders also, after the examples of the leaders of other religions, laying aside justice and honesty, try to invent passages in the form of reasonable arguments in support of those articles of faith which are manifestly nonsensical and absurd.[98]

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[95] Brijendra Nath Seal. *Rammohun, the Universal Man* (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1924). 26.
[96] Ibid. 3.
[97] Ghazi (2010). 79.
[98] Raja Rammohun Roy. *Tuhfat ul Muwahhadin (A Gift to Monotheists)*. Trans. Obaidullah el Obaide (Calcutta: Lahiri & Co., 1825). 4.

In the *Tuhfat,* Roy divides human beings into four classes, using a formulation that will be familiar to students of at least one heterodox school of Islam in the twentieth century United States, albeit without percentages:[99]

- Deceivers who willfully invent doctrines to gain followers and cause disunion.

- Deceived people who accept blindly the words of deceivers.

- Those who are both deceivers and deceived, who induce others to accept the words of deceivers.

- Those who, with God's help, are neither deceiver nor deceived.[100]

We find these definitions given with the confidence of one who believed himself neither deceiver nor deceived, considering himself a rationalist and holding rational thought as the ideal. He wrote:

> What necessity is there, that we should believe in these things which are inconsistent with rational conclusion and have not been observed personally: for instance, raising the dead, ascending to heaven, &c., which are said to have occurred many hundreds of years ago? It is to be wondered at, that although people in worldly transactions without knowing the connection of one thing with another do not believe that the one is the cause and the other the effect, yet when there is the influence of religion and faith, they do not hesitate to call one the cause and the other the effect, notwithstanding the fact that there is no connection or sequence between the two.[101]

Roy goes on to illustrate his point with examples of prayer and healing, and recovery after wearing particular charms and amulets. Elsewhere in the *Tuhfat*, Roy rejects the notion of any final prophet, be he David of the Jews or Muhammad of the Muslims.

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[99] Mattias Gardell. *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and The Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996). 224.
[100] Roy (1825). 24.
[101] Ibid. 10–11.

Interestingly, Roy cites India's own Guru Nanak as evidence against each Abrahamic

religion's assertion that theirs was the final prophet.[102]

Nevertheless, Roy was sufficiently what his biographer called a "Mohammedan with

the Mohammedans"[103] that Mughal emperor Akbar II felt comfortable sending him to

Britain in 1830,[104] where he convinced the British to increase the emperor's annual

stipend[105] and lobbied for the Crown's support of Regulation XVII, the "Bengal Sati

Resolution."[106] Roy, we should remember, apart from religious disputations with his

British contacts, held in high esteem much about Britain's role in India. He wrote of his

experience that:

> The European settlers, from motives of benevolence, public spirit
> and fellow-feeling towards their native neighbors, would establish
> schools and other seminaries of education for the cultivation of the
> English language throughout the country, and for the diffusion of a
> knowledge of European arts and sciences… By a free and
> extensive communication with the various classes of the native
> inhabitants the European settlers would gradually deliver their
> minds from the superstitions and prejudices, which have subjected
> the greater body of Indian people to social and domestic
> inconvenience, and disqualified them from useful exertions.[107]

What were these "superstitions and prejudices, which have subjected the greater body

of Indian people" to such dire circumstances? Roy tells us:

> I have never ceased to contemplate with the strongest feelings of
> regret, the obstinate adherence of my countrymen to their fatal
> system of idolatry, inducing for the sake of propitiating their
> supposed Deities, the violation of every humane and social feeling.
> And this in various instances; but more especially in the dreadful
> acts of self-destruction and immolation of the nearest relations,

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[102] Ibid. 19.
[103] Seal (1924). 26.
[104] Roy died of meningitis in 1833 while living in England.
[105] Ghazi (2010). 348.
[106] Though Roy is widely known and respected for raising his voice against *sati*, scholars such as Nicholas Dirks have suggested that it was not Roy who magnified the significance of *sati*, but rather that it marked "the mobilization of missionary pressure to enter British India and Christianize the practice of empire." Dirks, 2006. 198.
[107] Raja Rammohun Roy. "Settlement in India by Europeans" in *The English Works of Rammohun Roy* (Allahabad: Panini, 1906). 114.

> under the delusion of conforming to sacred religious rites. I have never ceased, I repeat, to contemplate these practices with the strongest feelings of regret, and to view in them the moral debasement of a race who, I cannot help thinking, are capable of better things, whose susceptibility, patience and mildness of character, render them worthy of a better destiny.[108]

Here we see Roy looking to England to cure India of its religious ills. Certainly Roy came to have a rather complex relationship with the faiths to which he was exposed. More than most, growing up in an "inter-religious" household where both Viṣṇu and Shakti were venerated, Roy would have seen firsthand the diversity of thought and practice behind his ancestors' traditions. It is thus a particular surprise and irony that scholars have credited Roy with an expression that has since confused and complicated popular discussions of Indian religion. Though linguists attest that the term "Hindu" was in use ca. 500 BCE as the name for an Indian river and the peoples living beyond it, it was Roy who in his 1816 English-language translation of *Isopaniṣad* popularized the term "Hinduism" to connote a singular religion.[109] Interestingly, though Roy may rightly be credited with popularizing the term "Hinduism," he did not invent it—and there is an intriguing hint that he may have learned the term from Baptist missionaries. Rev. Joshua Marshman of the Baptist mission in Serampore used the term "Hinduism" in his diary in 1802,[110] and we know that Roy met with another Serampore missionary, Rev. William Yates, in 1815 and 1816.[111] Did Roy acquire this term from Yates?

It is documented that Charles Grant, who later became Chairman of the British East India Company, used the term "Hindooism" in his personal correspondence as early as

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[108] Ram Mohan Roy. *Translation of Several Principal Books, Passages and Texts of the Veds, and of Some Controversial Works on Brahmunical Theology* (London: Parbury Allen, 1832). 52.
[109] Pennington (2005). 60.
[110] Geoffrey A. Oddie, "Hindu Religious Identity with Special Reference to the Origin and Significance of the term 'Hinduism', c. 1787–1947," in *Rethinking Religion in India* (London: Routledge, 2010). 45.
[111] Sophia Dobson Collet, ed. *The Life and Letters of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Calcutta: n.p., 1914). 67–68.

1787, and later in government correspondence,[112] but Roy's public-facing use of the term is likely its earliest use before a wide audience. Why does this matter? Why is the coined term "Hinduism" problematic? We may draw a parallel by considering the study of American religion. Imagine that we were to coin a term "Americanism" to describe the religion of the Americas. What would that term connote? Would we place Mormonism and Scientology within Americanism, though those faiths are quite doctrinally distinct from much larger American populations of Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists? Would Americanism connote the handful of doctrinal or philosophical approaches shared by a plurality of religious Americans? Or would it connote the broad range of doctrines and approaches found among those Americans? Certainly, no matter how we might define the term, some believers within the definitions would object. Would use of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints' *Book of Mormon* place a believer outside of Americanism, or is it the very definition of Americanism? What about the Church of Scientology's foundational text: *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*?

This is precisely the problem with the term "Hinduism." We can see the challenge in using a geographical designation—"America"—to define a religious landscape. Similarly, there is a problematic leap from "Hindu" as a river to "Hinduism" as the religion of the people living beyond that river. Let us not forget that "Hindoostan"—the land beyond the Indus River—was a term in common eighteenth century use to describe the domain of a Muslim ruler, the Mughal emperor.[113] Furthermore, well into the early years of the nineteenth century, records of the British East India Company make

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[112] Will Sweetman. *Mapping Hinduism: "Hinduism" and the Study of Indian Religions, 1600–1776* (Halle: Franckesche Stiftung, 2003). 56.
[113] Ian J. Barrow. "From Hindustan to India: Naming Change in Changing Names," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 26:1, 40.

reference to "Hindoo Christians" and "Hindoo Muslims" in a manner that indicates their country of birth, not a religious conversion.[114]

And yet, regardless of its problematic history, Roy appropriated the term "Hinduism" for his purposes. Even if we accept the common scholarly notion that "Hinduism" is a pattern first noticed and labeled by Western observers, Roy's use of the term underlines the fact that the term persisted and thrived as a result of Indian agency as well as colonial construct. As one scholar has put it:

> Hinduism represents a negotiation between Indians and Europeans.… neither exclusively a colonial product nor an age-old belief system but instead a negotiation of the two.[115]

Certainly, one can find fairly broad commonalities among the beliefs and practices of those who come under the umbrella of Hinduism. Yet a consistent definition remains elusive; various nineteenth century census definitions broadened the category "Hindu" to include "all believers in the Vedas" or those who "simply worship some god or goddess without knowing anything of the theology."[116] With such broad definitions, it is surely no surprise that India's 1872 census found that 87 percent of Indians could be classified as "Hindu"[117]

However problematic, Roy's decision to work within the broad category of "Hinduism" gave his polemics a powerful force. On the one hand, he could group together wildly disparate traditions of thought and practice in a manner apprehensible to his readers. On the other hand, he could make the grandiose claim that a "true Hinduism"

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[114] Robert Eric Frykenberg. "Constructions of Hinduism at the Nexus of History and Religion," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 23, No 3 (Winter, 1993). 525.
[115] Michael Haan. "Numbers in Nirvana: How the 1872–1921 Indian Censuses helped operationalize 'Hinduism.'" *Religion* 35, no 1 (January 1, 2005). 15.
[116] Ibid. 21.
[117] Ibid. 20.

had once existed, but had been lost to the superstitions of the traditions that had emerged

thereafter. Unlike some interpreters of Indian religion, Roy did not seek to rationalize or

contextualize indigenous traditions to gain British approval; indeed, he faulted those who

took such an approach:

> I have observed, that both in their writings and conversation, many
> Europeans feel a wish to palliate and soften the features of Hindoo
> idolatry; and are inclined to inculcate, that all objects of worship
> are considered by their votaries as emblematical representations of
> the Supreme Divinity! If this were indeed the case, I might perhaps
> be led into some examination of the subject: but the truth is, the
> Hindoos of the present day have no such views of the subject, but
> firmly believe in the real existence of innumerable gods and
> goddesses, who possess, in their own departments, full and
> independent power; and to propitiate them, and not the true God,
> are temples erected and ceremonies performed. There can be no
> doubt, however, and it is my whole design to prove, that every rite
> has its derivation from the allegorical adoration of the true Deity;
> but at the present day all this is forgotten, and among many it is
> even heresy to mention it![118]

Many will notice right away that Roy's above assertion contains a rather obvious

logical fallacy. He tells us that "the Hindoos of the present day" do not see their *mūrti*-

worship as allegorical or emblematical. But is Roy not a Hindu of his present day? If he,

quoting *Upaniṣads* to make his case, is to be classified outside of Hinduism, then of what

use is the term? Furthermore, as we saw earlier, various Vedic and post-Vedic texts offer

credible support for *mūrti* as allegory or emblem, as well as for *mūrti* as the descent or

the presence of the divine. Yet Roy, writing to a British audience, does not hesitate to

offer facile arguments that one could legitimately perceive as bearing the mark of the

straw-man:

> Those who do not practise the worship of the supreme God who is
> the subject of the Vedānta, but instead worship various imaginary
> forms, should be asked whether they claim these things to be the

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[118] Roy (1816). 4-5.

> Lord himself, or whether they perform pūjā and so on to these things as likenesses of some other being whom they call the Lord. In answer to this they cannot say that these things are the Lord himself, because these things are perishable, and in most cases are fabricated or controlled by themselves; so how can they suppose that something fabricated or controlled is the Lord? They will also be reluctant to say, in answer to the same question, that these objects are likenesses of the Lord; for the Lord, who is infinite and imperceptible to the senses, cannot have a finite and perceptible likeness.[119]

Here, Roy is putting his own words into the mouths of the "Hindus" he has created. Yet we can just as easily imagine this argument applied to British folk piety—but what would we learn from asking the average British Christian about the transubstantiation of the Communion wafer, or the metaphysics of the Trinity, or the means and efficacy of baptism? If Roy wants us to believe that popular piety must speak for the philosophers, has there ever been a philosophical system that can meet Roy's lofty standards? Surely not! Yet if all Roy is proving is that the masses favor what amounts to a simple devotional approach devoid of the rigors of philosophy, then all he has proved is a *reductio ad absurdum*—or at best a tautology.

We earlier read of Roy's stated preference for rational explanations of religious texts, so we may find it significant to examine his translations of several of the ancient *Upaniṣads*, texts typically dated to the period after the Vedas were written and before the *Ramāyāṇa* and *Mahābhārata* were completed. Scholars often look to these texts as illustrating a transition between the ritualistic concerns of the Vedas and the philosophical concerns of later Indian texts. First, we shall look at Roy's translations of three verses from the *Isopaniṣad,* side-by-side with translations by European Indologist

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[119] David H. Killingley. *The Only True God: Works on Religion by Rammohun Roy* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Grevatt & Grevatt, 1982). 15.

Max Müller and later Indian religious reformer Śri Aurobindo. First, we shall consider

verse 4:

Roy: The Supreme Spirit is one and unchangeable: he proceeds more rapidly than the comprehending power of the mind: Him no external sense can apprehend, for a knowledge of him outruns even the internal sense: He, though free from motion, seems to advance, leaving behind human intellect, which strives to attain a knowledge respecting him; He being the eternal ruler, the atmosphere regulates under him the whole system of the world.[120]

Aurobindo: One unmoving that is swifter than Mind, That the Gods reach not, for It progresses ever in front. That, standing, passes beyond others as they run. In That the Master of Life establishes the Waters.[121]

Müller: That one (the Self), though never stirring, is swifter than thought. The Devas (senses) never reached it, it walked before them. Though standing still, it overtakes the others who are running. Mātarisvan (the wind, the moving spirit) bestows powers on it.[122]

Notice in the above that while Aurobindo and Müller preserve in their translations

such details as the plural "Gods" (*devā*) and a personified spirit of the wind (*mātariśvā*),

Roy avoids in his translation any sense that there is a divine force operating other than

One, the Supreme Spirit.

Next, we shall examine Roy's approach to the texts, as suggested by his translation of

Isopaniṣad verse 7:

Roy: When a person possessed of true knowledge conceives that God extends over the whole universe *(that is, that God furnishes every particle of the universe with the light of his existence)*, how can he, as an observer of the real unity of the pervading Supreme existence, be affected with infatuation or grievance?[123]

Aurobindo: He in whom it is the Self-Being that has become all existences that are Becomings, for he has the perfect knowledge, how shall he be

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[120] Roy (1832). 101-102.
[121] Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2003). 6.
[122] F. Max Müller, ed. *The Sacred Books of the East,* vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879). 311.
[123] Roy (1832). 102.

> deluded, whence shall he have grief who sees everywhere
> oneness?[124]

Müller: When to a man who understands, the Self has become all things,
what sorrow, what trouble can there be to him who once beheld
that unity?[125]

In the above, we see that neither Aurobindo nor Müller hesitate to imply a monistic

viewpoint in which the self has identified with the wholeness of things. Only in Roy's

translation is there a separate "observer" rather than direct experiencer of "the pervading

Supreme existence." Yet, elsewhere, Roy concedes that it is not objectionable for a deity

or even a human being to identify personally as God. Roy tells us:

> The Vedant declares… "Every one, on having lost all self-
> consideration in consequence of being united with divine reflection,
> may speak as assuming to be the Supreme Being; like Bamdev (a
> celebrated Brahmun) who, in consequence of such self-
> forgetfulness, declared himself to have created the Sun, and Munoo
> the next person to Brahma." It is therefore optional with every one
> of the celestial Gods, as well as with every individual, to consider
> himself as God, under this state of self-forgetfulness and unity with
> the divine reflection, as the Ved says, "you are that true Being"
> (when you lose all self-consideration), and "O God I am nothing but
> you."[126]

Though Roy concedes that God may have either no form or may be the all-expression

of any individual being, his translation of verse 7 above takes a viewpoint much more in

keeping with Western monotheism than Indian monism. Indeed, we cannot help but

notice that although Roy has conceded elsewhere that God has no form, he adds to verse

7 a parenthetical thought not present in the Sanskrit—that God is not personally present

in the whole universe but instead furnishes the universe with "the light of his existence."

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[124] Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2003). 7.
[125] Müller (1879). 312.
[126] Roy (1832). 14–15.

Furthermore, as we learn elsewhere from Roy, his concept of God expects a great deal

from the seeker:

> The Supreme Being is not comprehensible by vision, or by any
> other of the organs of sense; nor can he be conceived by means of
> devotion, or virtuous practices! He sees every thing, though never
> seen; hears every thing, though never directly heard of! He is
> neither short, or is he long; inaccessible to the reasoning faculty;
> not to be compassed by description; beyond the limits of the
> explanation of the Ved, or of human conception.[127]

Throughout his life and consistently in his writings, Roy praised the rational approach

over the superstitious. Yet here he admits that the Supreme Being to which he wishes to

attend is in fact inaccessible to the reasoning facility of the mind, every bit as much as

that Being is inaccessible to the eye through the medium of *mūrti*. We see further

consequence of Roy's approach by comparing his translation of *Isopaniṣad* verse 18 to

two others':

Roy: "O illuminating fire," continues he, "observing all our religious
practices, carry us by the right path to the enjoyment of the
consequence of our deeds, and put an end to our sins; we being
now unable to perform thy various rites, offer to thee our last
salutation."[128]

Aurobindo: O god Agni, knowing all things that are manifested, lead us by the
good path to the felicity; remove from us the devious attraction of
sin. To thee completest speech of submission we would dispose.[129]

Müller: Agni, lead us on to wealth (beatitude) by a good path, thou, O God,
who knowest all things! Keep far from us crooked evil, and we
shall offer thee the fullest praise![130]

Here, Roy chooses in his translation to suppress the name of the Vedic deity Agni,

which leaves him with the curious phenomenon of a personified fire that has the power to

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[127] Ibid. 7.
[128] Ibid. 105.
[129] Aurobindo, *The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2003). 10.
[130] Müller (1879). 313-314.

observe and absolve. Elsewhere, Roy gives an explanation for such mention of gods in the ancient texts:

> Some celestial Gods have, in different instances, declared themselves to be independent deities, and also the object of worship; but these declarations were owing to their thoughts being abstracted from themselves and their being entirely absorbed in divine reflection.[131]

Yet, if this were the correct explanation, there should be no need to suppress the above text's reference to Agni!   Additionally, though Roy offers no further commentary in his translation above, we may wonder whether he considered "we being now unable to perform thy various rites" implicit in the text, or whether this is an emendation required by his philosophy.

Elsewhere, Roy gives us his translation of *Bhagavata Purana* III.29.22, which we can compare profitably with other translators' renditions:

Roy: I am the Lord God, present in all beings; anyone who foolishly worships an image instead of me, merely offers sacrifice in ashes.

Bryant: One who worships Me in the form of the Deity, but, out of ignorance, disregards Me as *Īśvara* in the form of the *ātman* residing in all beings, offers only ashes.[132]

Bhaktivedanta: One who worships the Deity of Godhead in the temples but does not know that the Supreme Lord, as Paramātmā, is situated in every living entity's heart, must be in ignorance and is compared to one who offers oblations into ashes.

We note right away that Roy's translation takes a rather Abrahamic tone in its opening ("I am the Lord God"), and includes an "instead" not present in the other translations. Yet, when we consider that the *Bhagavata Purana* elsewhere (VIII.16.39–40) describes

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[131] Roy (1832). 14.

[132] Edwin F. Bryant. *Bhakti Yoga: Tales and Teachings from the Bhagavata Purana* (New York: North Point Press, 2017). 277.

the sage Kasyapa teaching Aditi how to install and worship a *mūrti* of Viṣṇu[133], Roy's

iconoclastic reading may seem less certain.

Ultimately, in some circumstances at least, Roy had to admit that India's most ancient

religious literatures did not excoriate idolatry with quite the same force that we find in his

translations of the *Upaniṣads*. In the introduction to his translation of the *Mundaka*

Upaniṣad, Roy acknowledges:

> The Veds, although they tolerate idolatry as the last provision for
> those who are totally incapable of raising their minds to the
> contemplation of the invisible God of nature, yet repeatedly urge
> the relinquishment of the rites of idol worship, and the adoption of
> a purer system of religion, on the express grounds that the
> observance of idolatrous rites can never be productive of eternal
> beatitude. These are left to be practiced by such persons only as
> notwithstanding the constant teaching of spiritual guides, cannot be
> brought to see perspicuously the majesty of God through the works
> of nature.[134]

Roy here advocates that wise Hindus should be "raising their minds to the

contemplation of the invisible god of nature." Yet, as we have seen, he has elsewhere

admitted this to be an impossible task. Perhaps we can begin to understand why, even

within Roy's philosophical framework, *mūrti* remains a tolerated concession for those

who cannot do the impossible!

To this point, we have examined Roy's writings—his theoretical expositions of an

idealized philosophical religion that he equated with a purified "Hinduism." What,

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[133] arcitvā gandha-mālyādyaiḥ   śṛtaṁ payasi naivedyaṁ
payasā snapayed vibhum   śāly-annaṁ vibhave sati
vastropavītābharaṇa-   sasarpiḥ saguḍaṁ dattvā
pādyopasparśanais tataḥ   juhuyān mūla-vidyayā (40)
gandha-dhūpādibhiś cārced
dvādaśākṣara-vidyayā (39)
[134] Roy (1832). 25–26.

though, was the practical consequence of his attempt at reform? Roy himself in the

introduction to his 1817 translation of the *Katha Upaniṣad* gave an optimistic view:

> A great body of my countrymen, possessed of good
> understandings, and not much fettered with prejudices, being
> perfectly satisfied with the truth of the doctrines contained in this
> and other works, already laid by me before them, and of the gross
> errors of the peurile [sic] system of idol worship which they were
> led to follow, have altered their religious conduct in a manner
> becoming the dignity of human beings; while the advocates of
> idolatry and their misguided followers, over whose opinions
> prejudice and obstinacy prevail more than good sense and
> judgment, prefer custom and fashion to the authorities of their
> scriptures, and therefore continue, under the form of religious
> devotion, to practise a system which destroys, to the utmost
> degree, the natural texture of society, and prescribes crimes of the
> most heinous nature which even the most savage nations would
> blush to commit.[135]

How large was the "great body" of countrymen of whom Roy wrote? By 1911, India's

census listed just 374 Brahmos in the Madras report, and by 1921 the number had

dropped to 171.[136] This may be a misleading figure, of course, to the extent that

individuals with essentially Brahmo beliefs and practices nevertheless for social reasons

continued to use a more mainstream religious label. Furthermore, with the many schisms

among Brahmo societies, and with one Dalit movement known as "Adi Dharma" (same

as one Brahmo-derived sect),[137] it may be impossible to determine how many of the

eight- or nine-million self-professed "Adi Dharma" adherents are philosophically related

to Roy's philosophy—but, in any case, even nine million out of India's 1.3 billion is but

the tiniest of influences. Yet there are measures of influence that extend beyond mere

numbers. As historian David Kopf reminds us, "The yearly membership roll of the

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[135] Ibid. 57-58.

[136] Kenneth W. Jones. *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). 167.

[137] Ramnarayan S. Rawat. *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011). 2.

Calcutta Brahmo Samaj a half century ago would never show more than nine hundred

names, but one has only to glance at them to grasp immediately the power and influence

of its civil servants, lawyers, judges, scientists, professors, doctors, and journalists."[138]

Roy was not alone in his desire to rid Indian religion of image-worship. The

eighteenth-century reformer Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–1883), who went on to establish

the Arya Samaj, described in his autobiography a pivotal event that occurred when he

was fourteen years old and came to shape his view of image-worship. After watching a

mouse scamper around on the family's mūrti of Śiva, even eating some of the sacred food

offerings, he reports being moved to serious introspection:

> Is it possible, I asked myself, that this semblance of man, the idol
> of a personal God, that I see bestriding his bull before me, and
> who, according to all religious accounts, walks about, eats, sleeps,
> and drinks' who can hold a trident in his hand, beat upon his
> dumroo, and pronounces curses upon men—is it possible that he
> can be the Mahadeva, the great Deity? The same who is invoked as
> the Lord of Kailasa, the Supreme Being and the divine hero of all
> the stories we read of him in the Puranas? Unable to resist such
> thoughts any longer, I awoke my father, abruptly asking him to
> enlighten me; to tell me whether this hideous emblem of Siva in
> the temple was identical with the Mahadeva of the Scriptures or
> something else. "Why do you ask?" said my father. "Because," I
> answered, "I feel it impossible to reconcile the idea of an
> Omnipotent, living God, with this idol, which allows mice to run
> over his body and thus suffers his image to be polluted without the
> slightest protest." Then my father tried to explain to me that this
> stone representation of the Mahadeva of Kailasa, having been
> consecrated by the holy Brahmans, became, in consequence the
> god himself; and is worshipped and regarded as such; adding that
> as Siva cannot be perceived personally in this Kali Yug—the age
> of mental darkness—hence we have the idol in which the Mahadev
> of Kailasa is imagined by his votaries; this kind of worship
> pleasing the great Deity as much as if, instead of the emblem, he
> were there himself. But the explanation fell short of satisfying me.
> I could not, young as I was, help but suspecting misinterpretation

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[138] David Kopf. *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979). 114.

and sophistry in all of this.[139]

Should we take this report innocently? Sarasvati published it more than forty years after the event. It certainly describes a teenager who is not only precocious but also bold in challenging his father. Yet it describes the father offering a report that we can recognize as a "straw man"—certainly not the most theologically nuanced, and not likely the best defense of image-worship Sarasvati would hear in the intervening years.

Sarasvati was born in an orthodox Brahmana family in Gujarat. Unlike Roy, who wrote a great deal in English, Sarasvati wrote the bulk of his work in Hindi—which in itself tells us much about the different audiences the two reformers sought. In stark contrast to the elaborate systems of worship so common in India's temples, Sarasvati prescribed a much simpler regimen:

> The religious practices and rituals of the Arya Samaj are also few and very simple. Swami Dayanand has himself laid down the procedure of their performance in his book *Sanskar Vidhi*. The important occasions in man's life, such as birth, initiation for learning or education, marriage and death and [sic] celebrated in a simple way without any regard for inauspicious days or other astrological superstitions. There is a belief in prayer and meditation for spiritual peace only, but there are no temples or idols or any prescribed sacred place of worship. The morning and evening prayers called *Sandhay* can be briefly recited at any place within ten minutes. The shrines and certain rivers and mountains may have historical and other importance, but there is nothing divine about them. Even the cow is not a sacred animal. Dayanand advocated its protection because of its usefulness.… the haven or *yajna* is performed in order to recite Vedic mantras.[140]

Sarasvati is known to have had contact with Brahmo Samaj members, and even met with leading Brahmo Debendranath Tagore in 1872. Yet where Roy's writings spoke of different *dharmas* in the sense of different religions, Sarasvati proposed a specifically

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[139] John Nicol Farquar. *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New York: Macmillan, 1915). 103.

[140] R.K. Pruthi. *Arya Samaj and Indian Civilization* (New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, 2004). 69–70.

Indian *dharma* as a reaction against Roy's syncretism.[141] In his *Satyartha Prakash* (The

Light of Truth), with regard to the Brahmo Samaj, Sarasvati opined:

> How can the principles of these who are unaware of the Vedic lore
> be all good? They saved many persons from the clutches of
> Christianity, they removed idolatry also to a certain extent, and
> they protected people from the snares of certain spurious
> scriptures. These are all good points. But they are lacking in
> patriotism. They have borrowed much from Christianity in their
> way of living.… Not only do they not respect the Vedas etc. but
> they do not desist from condemning them. The books of the
> Brāhma Samāja include among the saints Christ, Moses,
> Mohammad, Nānāka and Chaitanyā. They do not mention even the
> name of rshis and sages of ancient India.… The Brāma Samājists
> and Prāthanā Samājists call themselves educated, though they have
> no knowledge of the literature of their own country, i.e.,
> Sanskṛta.[142]

Nevertheless, Sarasvati's respect for Indian ṛsis and sages and their scriptures had its

limits. Rejecting the idea that human meditation on the formless God may be aided by an

image, he wrote:

> If a mere sight of an image reminds you of God, will you not think
> of God by observing the earth, water, fire, air plants and the like
> numerous objects, which are made by omnipotent God, displaying
> His wonderful skill in them, which are in fact gigantic images, all
> full of the heavenly design, and out of which men make their tiny
> artificial images? Your assertion is totally wrong that the sight of
> images calls forth the idea of God in your mind. Also, when there
> will be no image before a man, he will not think of God and will
> fall to robbery, adultery and other vices in the absence of the idol;
> for, he knows that none sees him there, and so he will seldom fail
> in committing an evil.… If, on the other hand, a man who rejects
> material images, believes & knows that God is always
> omnipresent, heart-searching, & just; he always holds the belief
> that God sees all his good and bad actions & so he does not think
> himself for a moment to be away from God. He never thinks of
> evil, much less he does it. [143]

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[141] Torkel Brekke. "The Conceptual Foundation of Missionary Hinduism," *The Journal of Religious History,* Vol. 23, no. 2, June 1999. 206.
[142] Dayananda Sarasvati. *An English Translation of Satyarth Prakash*. (Lahore: Virjanand Press, 1908). 376.
[143] Ibid. 318.

Elsewhere, Sarasvati's critique extends to the Christian crucifix[144] and the Black Stone[145] in Islam's Kaaba, as examples of idolatry that he considers contrary to the pure Vedic religion. While we can appreciate the felt intensity of Sarasvati's presentation, a strict logician might notice at least one alternate interpretation not considered. Sarasvati writes above that the natural world provides ample images of far greater wondrousness than the image created by the hand of the *śilpan*. Yet his point seems not to be that the natural world can direct the worshipper's mind toward God; rather, he assumes that one who appreciates God through reflection on a physical form will become a wholly immoral person in the absence of that form.

Such interpretations notwithstanding, Sarasvati's reclamation of the Vedas may reasonably be seen as a conservative movement when compared to Roy's. Even so, Sarasvati's Arya Samaj was in its day sufficiently feared as radical that when Sarasvati arrived in Lahore in 1877, "conservative Hindus" established a "Sanatana Dharma Sabha" to combat his influence, and their spokesman Shraddha Ram shadowed Sarasvati; a source sympathetic to Arya Samaj reports that "as Dayanand toured the Punjab, Shraddha Ram followed in his wake to strengthen the beleaguered forces of orthodoxy."[146] Not accidentally, the Sabha in defending its view of Hinduism seized on image worship as a core feature that must be retained, in contrast to the message of Sarasvati and Arya Samaj. Indeed, one might argue that the ultimate effect of Arya Samaj was to strengthen most Hindus' sense that image-worship is at the core of their religion.

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[144] Ibid. 486.

[145] Ibid. 502.

[146] John Zavos. "Defending Hindu Tradition: Sanatana Dharma as a Symbol of Orthodoxy in Colonial India." *Religion* (2001). 110.

And yet, as with the tiny Brahmo movement, so too has Arya Samaj persisted to this day in its own right. But where Roy's philosophical insights have at most spurred a movement among educated elites in India, Sarasvati's Arya Samaj has expanded its influence with the expansion of the Indian disaspora. As of March 2018, the Arya Samaj reported active centers outside of India in Canada, Kenya, Mauritius, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Singapore, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[147]

Yet, despite the intellectual reach of the philosophy of Rammohun Roy, and the global reach of the philosophy of Dayananda Sarasvati, we find that even among India's nineteenth-century religious innovators and reformists, rejection of mūrti-worship simply never became a widespread cause. No less a figure than Swami Vivekananda, disciple of Ramakrishna, had this to say:

> The external worship of images has, however, been described in all our Shastras as the lowest of all the low forms of worship. But that does not mean that it is a wrong thing to do. Despite the many iniquities that have found entrance into the practices of image-worship as it is in vogue now, I do not condemn it. Aye, where would I have been, if I had not been blessed with the dust of the holy feet of that orthodox, image-worshipping Brahmana [Ramakrishna]![148]

Vivekananda's successors in the Ramakrishna Mission have gone so far as to distance themselves from Hinduism, even seeking to be classified by the Indian government as a separate, non-Hindu faith. Yet for all of their reformist tendencies, and no matter how highly they privilege other modes of worship, they have not labeled mūrti-worship wrong or worthy of rejection.

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[147] *http://www.worldwide.thearyasamaj.org,* accessed on March 20, 2018.
[148] Swami Prajnanananda, ed. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. 3 (Mayavati: Prabhuddha Bharata Office, 1915). 460.

CHAPTER 4: Mūrti, Meaning, and Museums

India's aesthetic theory shapes its theology of image-worship. Western
observers rediscover India's images in a new context.

Long before encountering India's tradition of image-worship, Western observers of

Indian art were already, through European culture, familiar with the role of religious

images as teaching tools, particularly for illiterate Christians. In such contexts…

> …the function of the image was didactic because it was used to
> teach the Sacred Word to the illiterate as a visual complement to
> the Scriptures. Since the danger of idolatry was always there, the
> Church exhorted its followers not to take the images literally, but
> only standing for a higher idea. Symbols of this kind were easily
> comprehensible for they were a sign language that gave visual
> form to canonical ideas. [149]

Though some strains of Protestant Christianity almost entirely avoided visual

representations of divinity, images of saints and even of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

were uncontroversial elements in many Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. In such

contexts, they were often recognized as "icons." We read:

> The term *Icon* (*ikon*, Gr. *eikon*) means a figure representing a
> deity, or a saint, in painting, mosaic, sculpture, etc., which is
> specially meant for worship or which is in some way or other
> associated with the rituals connected with the worship of different
> divinities. Thus, though this is not exactly the same as a fetishistic
> symbol used for their crude ritualism by undeveloped mankind, yet
> it is not very far removed from the latter; it has, however, some
> higher clear-cut conception which is missing in the other. This
> Greek word *eikon* with its above connotation has its close parallel
> in such Indian terms as *arcā, bera, vigraha*, etc., which definitely
> denote sensible representations of particular deities or saints
> receiving the devout homage of their bhaktas or exclusive
> worshippers.[150]

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[149] Partha Mitter. *Much-Maligned Monsters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). 30.
[150] Banerjea (1974). 1.

How interesting, then, that Christian Europeans—who could appreciate their own culture's icons, even venerating them without any fear of idolatrous worship—would level such charges as we saw in Chapter 2. If idolatry is problematic, even objectionable, one would think it to be so even when the acts of idolatry were serene and antiseptic. So, is it significant that the horrified accounts that have come down to us do not often involve a Western traveler recoiling at worshippers offering plates of milk or sticks of incense to serenely meditative images of the Buddha or of Śiva in cross-legged yoga postures? Rather, the accounts brought back to horrified Britons typically involved idolatrous practices involving images that to the observer implied some kind of violence.

Yet we do not find Western travelers equating bloody, violent or gaudy Indian images with European images of a crucified Jesus Christ hanging on a cross with bloodied, shredded skin and the pallor of impending death. Rather, British travelers would describe India's gruesome images in ways that evoked the papacy, or Satan and his devils. This alone should be a strong hint that there is a large subjective cultural component to the interpretation of India's images, and that India's earliest Western visitors often lacked the Indian cultural context that might have allowed appreciation rather than revulsion upon seeing the images.

In his article titled "Epistemology of Rasa Experience," Professor V. N. Jha describes the importance of the artist's intent in the creation of a work of art meant to be understood through the prism of *rasa*:

> Unless one is successful in understanding the intention of the artist, one cannot feel satisfied that he has understood the art form. There is no guarantee that if a particular understanding of an art form has been palatable to a connoisseur, he has understood the intended meaning for that art form. But logically seeing, the meaning of an art form has to be only that which is intended by the artist…. By

the function of universalization the audience or spectators start realizing that they too are in the same state. It is because of this *sadharanikarana* that the aesthetic rapture cannot be compared with any mundane experience.[151]

If the viewer (or critic) must understand the artist's intention, this would seem to constrain the appeal of the art to those with the background to appreciate it. Indeed, this is one distinguishing feature of *rasa* theory:

> Bharata, the legendary author of the *Natyashastra*, understood from the outset that there were levels of appreciation. Not everyone is capable of appreciating art at the most elevated standard.[152]

Imagine the plight of an untutored viewer looking at a statue of Śiva's furious *tāṇḍava* dance, or at a man-lion's face growling over the disemboweled intestines of its victim. For that matter, even within the tradition, devotees of Viṣṇu and Śiva will likely bring different presuppositions to the viewing. Yet, as we shall see, *rasa* theory—unlike much modern Western theory—is not a radically viewer-oriented approach to art. It presumes that there is a "best" way to appreciate in full the work the artisan has created.

Nevertheless, though *Natyashastra* very clearly sets out Bharata Muni's ideal, there is room for a different perspective—perhaps we might call it more pragmatic—as we can see illustrated by this text from the *Bhagavata Purana*:

> Kṛṣṇa went to the arena with his elder brother. He was perceived by the wrestlers as a lightning bolt; by men as the best of men; by the women as Kāma (Cupid) personified; by the *gopas* as their relative; by the unrighteous rulers of the earth as the chastiser; by His mother and father as a child; by Kaṁsa, the king of the Bhojas, as death; by the ignorant as the manifest universe; by the *yogīs* as the Supreme Truth; and by the Vṛṣṇi clan as the Supreme Divinity. (X.43.14)[153]

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[151] Pāṇḍe (2009). 12–13.
[152] Susan L Schwartz. *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). 2.
[153] Bryant (2017). 79.

If the *avatāra* Kṛṣṇa himself could be viewed in different ways by those having different relationships with him, it is no surprise that different viewers, having different relationships with a *mūrti* (whether outside the culture of the image, or occupying different places within the culture), may view it differently.

However, we should appreciate that while there may be "better" and "worse" ways to appreciate an artist's intent within the scope of *rasa* theory, the art does not merely serve some didactic purpose in demonstrating who has a better and who has a worse shared remembrance of some aspect of a shared culture. No, these acts of sharing culture between artist and viewer have a much loftier ideal purpose:

> The arts are not for our instruction, but for our delight, and this delight is something more than pleasure, it is the godlike ecstasy of liberation from the restless activity of the mind and the senses, which are the veils of all reality, transparent only when we are at peace with ourselves.[154]

We might wish that Coomaraswamy in the above quote had inserted the word "merely" between "not" and "for." We should not entirely dismiss the "instructional" aspect of Indian art in conveying practical knowledge of what Indian scriptures called the *purusarthas*—the four goals of human life (viz. *dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha: right conduct,*). We may see this in temple carvings, as at Khajuraho, depicting the range of activities within *kama*, or we may find a depiction of sacred history and theology through carvings showing the stories of the gods. Indeed, it has been said that Hindu images are "visual 'theologies,' and they continue to be 'read' as such by Hindus today."[155]

In any case, whatever teaching function the image may perform, we should realize that, within the context of India's sacred texts, the ultimate purpose of appreciating

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[154] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. *The Mirror of Gesture*. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2010). 9.
[155] Eck (1998). 41.

devotional art is not simply knowledge or cultural enrichment. Rather, its purpose is to arouse a delight so intense that it leads to a self-forgetfulness that transcends mere knowledge about a work of art. Knowledge may be a necessary foundation for the fullest and most proper experience of *rasa*, but the experience is far more than mere knowledge. Where Western aesthetics have given us through Aristotle's *Poetics* a theory of *catharsis*—of viewers emptying themselves as they view a performance—one can argue that *rasa* theory attempts quite the opposite, as it seeks to fill the viewer with emotions that lead to self-forgetfulness and spiritual uplift through evocation of the *rasas*.

Indeed, the nature and role of the "self" is quite different in *rasa* theory than in much Western theory, such as Aristotle's *Poetics*. Where Aristotle's *catharsis* is intimately personal to each self that experiences it, *rasa* theory presupposes a mechanism that elevates the properly prepared viewer toward a transcendence beyond the personal. Susan Schwartz reminds us that "rasa is never individual or personal sentiment."[156] The artisan creating a work according to ancient guidelines…

> …may or may not experience the *rasa* that he portrays. If he has trained properly, he is capable of projecting it completely so that it stands outside of himself, much as the gods in Hindu mythology create the world, and the simile is not accidental. Once it is 'out there,' the performer may, indeed, perceive it.[157]

Such portrayal is not an end in and of itself; it is meant to serve an edifying purpose both immanent and transcendent. Its goal is that the…

> …educated and prepared recipients of the performance may have a moment of enlightenment and transcendence, and that is the ultimate purpose of the enterprise; the performance is a means to that end. The goal is to transcend the individual self altogether… The ego is shed to spotlight that mysterious presence whose nature

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[156] Schwartz (2004). 97.
[157] Ibid.

is divine.[158]

This is not to say that such perception and enlightenment is easy or automatic, or that

it will come to the observer without prior training. Western sociologists have also

recognized this phenomenon.

> When faced with legitimate works of art, people most lacking the
> specific competence apply to them the perceptual schemes of their
> own ethos, the very ones which structure their everyday perception
> of everyday existence. These schemes, giving rise to products of an
> unwilled, unselfconscious systematicity, are opposed to the more
> or less fully stated principles of an aesthetic.[159]

Within the appreciation of Indian devotional art, that "specific competence" is found

in viewers' grasp of the values, stories and culture of the tradition in which a work of art

is delivered. From this perspective, we would not at all expect that images of deities

would be apprehensible to viewers coming to those images from the perspective of

Abrahamic religion. But what about Indians themselves, after centuries of British rule?

Some have suggested that, because of the deforming influence of British colonial culture

imposed atop India's ancient arts and traditions, images of the deity are one of the few

remaining elements of older Indian culture through which the traditional notion of *rasa*

can be tasted:

> During the British Colonial period Indian theatre was influenced
> by Western modes, and although the folk tradition did survive, the
> classical Indian theatre, which had earlier been disrupted by the
> Mughal (Islamic) invasions was to be found no more, except in the
> kind of revivals attempted by a writer like Karnad, whose drama
> itself is a hybrid construct influenced by both the East and the
> West.… interestingly enough, at times this revival of Sanskrit
> dramatic techniques is routed through the theatre of Bertolt Brecht,
> which has had a major impact on modern Indian drama.[160]

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[158] Ibid.

[159] Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1984). 44.

[160] Nilufer E. Bharucha. "The Bhibitsa Rasa in Anglophone Indian Cultural Discourse" in *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007). 73.

These Western modes, in any case, do not obscure one important distinction among the different types of images worshipped in India—a distinction between images crafted for worshippers within the Vaiṣṇavite traditions (worshippers of Viṣṇu or his *avatāras*) and the Śaivite traditions (worshippers of Śiva or his *avatāras*).

> Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas part company, however, on the most suitable kind of form to construct for their gods. According to Vaiṣṇava texts, the best form is an anthropomorphic one (Perhaps we should call it an enhanced anthropomorphic form, since the icon usually has four or eight arms.) The Śaivas by contrast argue that a liṅga— a nonanthropomorphic, nonpartitive, round-topped cylinder—is the most appropriate physical form for worshiping Śiva, precisely because it parallels in its wholeness and abstractness the highest level of Śiva's being, the Supreme Śiva "without parts" (*niṣkala*). Śaivas consider anthropomorphic images of Śiva such as Vṛṣabhavāhana less complete approximations of the totality of Śiva's being. These images seldom serve as central icons in medieval Śaiva temples, but rather supplement the Śiva liṅga as secondary and processional images.[161]

Interestingly, the charge of "phallus-worship" applied to those who worship a cylinder with rounded top may date back to the time of the *Ṛg Veda*, as we saw earlier, whether or not this charge had anything to do with traditions that would later be associated with Śiva. Yet such worship contained enough of an abstract quality that we do not read of Western observers decrying it with the same detail and fervor applied to the worship of Viṣṇu or of the Goddess (e.g. Kālī or Durga). There is, however, one well-known image of Śiva that captures an embodied level of frenzy far removed from the peaceful simplicity of the *lingaṃ*: Śiva Nataraja—the god performing his ecstatic *tāṇḍava* dance that, depending on the interpreter, either depicts or symbolizes the god's role in creating, preserving and eventually destroying the universe. It does not take much

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[161] Davis (1997). 30–31.

imagination to notice, especially in Indian art, the overlap between the category of dance and the category of image—indeed, *Natyashastra*, the text from which we earlier saw the origins of codified *rasa* theory, also discusses *rasa* in the broader artistic context of music and dance. Ananda Coomaraswamy points out the link:

> It is, however, scarcely realised how closely connected are the dancing and the sculpture. Many of the gods are themselves dancers, and, in particular, the everlasting operation of creation, continuance, and destruction—the eternal Becoming, informed by All-pervading Energy—is marvellously represented in the dance of Śiva. He also exhibits dances of triumph and of destruction. Kālī, likewise, dances in the burning ground, which we understand to signify the heart of the devotee made empty by renunciation. Śri Krishna dances a dance of triumph following the victory over Kāliya, and another General Dance, with the milkmaids of Brindāban, who are the souls of men. Most of the dances just mentioned, however, except the Rāsa Mandala or General Dance last spoken of, are Tāndava dances and represent a direct cosmic activity.… It will be seen that in all cases the dance is felt to fulfil a higher end than that of mere entertainment.[162]

No doubt there is something primeval about the human response to dance. It may be of interest to remember that even Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the most notable Western philosophers of the last few centuries, made a striking comment in this regard: "I could believe only in a God who would know how to dance."[163] Even in ancient Rome, poets and philosophers saw dance as directly or by analogy a fundamental aspect of the universe. Coomaraswamy reminds us of the Roman poet Lucian, who wrote:

> It would seem that dancing came into being at the beginning of all things, and was brought to light together with Eros, that ancient one, for we see this primeval dancing clearly set forth in the choral dance of the constellations, and in the planets and fixed stars, their interweaving and interchange and orderly harmony.[164]

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[162] Coomaraswamy (2010). 8–9.
[163] Friedrich Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*. (London: Macmillan, 1896). 50.
[164] Ananda Coomaraswamy. *The Dance of Śiva*. (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2010). 56.

How, then, are we to understand the image of a dancing form of divinity, such as Śiva

Nataraja? Elsewhere we may find Śiva in *padmāsana*, meditating serenely. We may find

him portrayed as the crafty Bholanath, or as the androgynous Ardhanarisvara, half male

and half female. We may even find him as a householder, with wife Parvati and sons

Ganesh and Kartikkeya. What, then, are we to take away from our vision of Śiva

Nataraja? Coomaraswamy describes the image thusly:

> The [Śiva Nataraja] images, then, represent Śiva dancing, having
> four hands, with braided and jewelled hair of which the lower
> locks are whirling in the dance. In His hair may be seen a
> wreathing cobra, a skull, and the mermaid figure of Gangā; upon it
> rests the crescent moon, and it is crowned with a wreath of Cassia
> leaves. In His right ear He wears a man's earring, a woman's in the
> left; He is adorned with necklaces and armlets, a jewelled belt,
> anklets, bracelets, finger and toe rings. The chief part of His dress
> consists of tightly fitting breeches, and He wears also a fluttering
> scarf and sacred thread. One right hand holds a drum, the other is
> uplifted in the sign of do not fear: one left hand holds fire, the
> other points down upon the demon Muyalaka, a dwarf holding a
> cobra: the left foot is raised. There is a lotus pedestal, from which
> springs an encircling glory (*tiruvāsi*), fringed with flame, and
> touched within by the hands holding drum and fire.[165]

For the devotee of Śiva, this is not a scene that frightens. Rather, it inspires awe and

devotion. As Rekha Jhanji describes the Śiva-bhakta's experience of the deity's intense

activity:

> *Śiva-rasa* is the essence of all cosmic creation and *natya rasa* is the
> essence of drama and poetry. In fact *rasa* alone is *natya*. And *rasa*
> (in art) is not given, it has to be experienced.[166]

When *Śiva-bhaktas* view their Lord's dance, what do they see? Coomaraswamy

explicates what is going on in the heart and mind of the *bhakta* upon seeing the image:

> Śiva is a destroyer and loves the burning ground. But what does He
> destroy? Not merely the heavens and earth at the close of a world-

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[165] Ibid. 58.
[166] Pāṇḍe (2009). 26.

cycle, but the fetters that bind each separate soul. Where and what is the burning ground? It is not the place where our earthly bodies are cremated, but the hearts of His lovers, laid waste and desolate. The place where the ego is destroyed signifies the state where illusion and deeds are burnt away: that is the crematorium, the burning-ground where Śri Natarāja dances.[167]

Coomaraswamy reminds us that the Tandava dance represents Śiva's "five activities" of: *Śrishti* (overlooking, creation, evolution), *Sthiti* (preservation, support), *Samhāra* (destruction, evolution), *Tirobhava* (veiling, embodiment, illusion, giving rest), *Anugraha* (release, salvation, grace).[168] How highly esteemed is this dance as a symbol of divine activity in our world? Coomaraswamy avers:

Whatever the origins of Śiva's dance, it became in time the clearest image of the *activity* of God which any art or religion can boast of.[169]

Śiva, of course, is not the only god who dances. Krishna's dance has very different connotations than Śiva's, evoking *srngara rasa* rather than one of the unpleasant *rasas*. Texts within the Vaishnavite tradition allow for "innumerable" *avatāras*; we find:

Just as from an inexhaustible lake thousands of streams flow on all sides, so also from the Remover-of-Sorrows (Hari), sum of all reality, come forth countless incarnations.
—*Bhagavata Purana*, I.3.26–27.[170]

Even so, ten *avataras* are generally recognized as the most prominent. Two of these—Parasurama and Kalki—are most often portrayed holding weapons; a third, Narasiṃha, uses his teeth and claws as powerful weapons to vanquish his enemies and protect his *bhaktas*.

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[167] Coomaraswamy (2010). 61.
[168] Ibid. 59.
[169] Ibid. 56.
[170] Maniraj Sukdaven. "A Systematic Understanding of the Evolution of Hindu Deities in the Development of the Concept of Avatara". *Dutch Reformed Theological Journal.* Vol. 53, no. 1 & 2, 2012. 216–217.

Earlier, we speculated that some of the most virulent European reactions against India's mūrtis may have involved Narasiṃha. This is not just a Western reaction; it has been suggested that in some cases a major temple will prefer not to:

> …enthrone the terrible form of a god, so they [in the case of Narasiṃha] substitute for the murder scene either Laksmi-Narasiṃha, in which the god is seated and holds his wife… on his left knee, or, quite often, YogaNarasiṃha, in which the half-human, half-leonine form, strangely enough, assumes a posture of yoga. This form of the descent of the god recalls that he is above all the Great Yogi and the god of bhakti, the god of all mercy.[171]

Even so, we do find more than a few temples at which "Ugra-Narasiṃha"—the ferocious form of Narasiṃha may be found, whether in the *garbhagriha* or on a temple wall. We find this at the Laksmi-Narasiṃha temple at Hampi, capital of the Vijayanagara empire, where Ugra-Narasiṃha stands twenty-two feet high. Carved ca. 1528 CE from a single piece of stone, the image depicts Narasiṃha disemboweling Hiranyakaśipu while resting on the coils of a seven-headed snake. Interestingly, archaeologists have found this to be originally a Laksmi-Narasiṃha that was damaged and then reconstructed as an Ugra-Narasiṃha. Another Ugra-Narasiṃha displays his ferocious form in a thirteenth-century CE carving on the wall of Channakeśava Temple, in Belur, Karnataka. Kamrisch shows us an Ugra-Narasiṃha ca. 1100 CE at Anadra in Rajasthan.[172]

So, we have seen angry Narasiṃha disemboweling his overmatched foe, intestines splayed out in an unsettling manner. We have seen wild Śiva crushing his foe underfoot, dancing as if in the cremation ground, as if on fire as the destroyer of the cosmos.   Yet those same fierce figures are able to inspire devotional love in the hearts of their *bhaktas*. What is going on?

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[171] Yves Bonnefoy, ed. *Asian Mythologies*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993). 80.
[172] Stella Kramrisch. *Indian Sculpture: Ancient, Classical and Mediæval* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013). 185.

> In any image, it is the combination and juxtaposition of these gestures and emblems which expresses the ambiguities, the tensions, and the paradoxes which Hindus have seen in the deity: Śiva holds both the drum and the flame; the Goddess Kālī simultaneously wears a gory garland of skulls and gestures her protection; Viṣṇu appears with Śiva's emblems in his own hands.… The many myths of the tradition are narrated in living stone.[173]

Can a Western audience appreciate such "living stone"? We have seen that India's first British visitors saw India's art through the lens of their Protestant and European cultural contexts—using the language of Bourdieu we might call them captives of their *doxa*. But is this captivity inevitable, or can a careful scholar rise above it? And how—if at all—can we as observers even tell the difference, unless we ourselves have expanded our frame of reference beyond that of the scholar whose works we examine? Colonial rule gave Britain the ability to expand its frame of reference by collecting in museums representative samples of the great variety of artifacts and images encountered through exploration, commerce and conquest. As Bernard Cohn reminds us:

> Each of the major British wars and victories of the first half of the nineteenth century was brought home in the form of relics and trophies to be displayed by the [British East India] Company in its museum or by the Crown in its armories in the Tower [of London].[174]

Not only did the temples of India provide material for the museums of Britain, it can be said that—for many Europeans—India itself was a vast museum. Even within India, we find what Cohn calls the "museological modality" at work as early as the 1840s with the establishment in Calcutta of a large-scale museum, under the aegis of the Asiatic

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[173] Eck (1998). 41.
[174] Bernard S. Cohn. *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). 104.

Society of Bengal, which later developed into the India Museum—presently India's

largest general museum.

Certainly there are voices, among those who administer or curate museums, that

harbor a significant ambivalence about their role and their task in gathering and

displaying images that may have particular significance to the communities from which

the images were collected. A common theme is expressed by this proposed statement of

principle for those who are responsible for museum collections:

> Museum professionals ought not to acquire objects significant to
> the cultural heritage of other lands or people, and ought to give
> extreme attention to those objects already in the museum's
> collection that may have religious or sacred meaning to others.[175]

Modern museum professionals have recognized the dual, perhaps contrary, functions

that their facilities are called upon to perform. As one frequently heard formulation puts

it:

> As the shrine of an elitist religion and at the same time a utilitarian
> instrument of democratic education, the museum may be said to
> have suffered schizophrenia from the start.[176]

In the context of British colonialism, then, we can appreciate historian Cohn's

observation about the power of museumship:

> The power to define the nature of the past and establish priorities
> in the creation of a monumental record of a civilization, and to
> propound canons of taste, are among the most significant
> instrumentalities of rulership.[177]

Ernest Binfield Havell (1861–1934) was one of the leading British art historians of

his day, specializing in India from his post as Superintendent of the Madras School of

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[175] Gary Edison, ed. *Museum Ethics: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1997). 99.
[176] Linda Nochlin. "Museums and Radicals: A History of Emergencies," in *Art in America*, vol. 54, no. 4 (1971). 646.
[177] Bernard S. Cohn (1996). 10.

Art. Before Havell, Western art critics tended to judge Indian art against a standard of

Western classical art, such that even the most elevated forms of Indian art would be

judged as inferior. Havell was among the very first who as a Western critic did not take

for granted the unquestioned supremacy of Western classical art.[178] One scholar describes

Havell's approach thusly:

> Havell's notion of a unitary Indian artistic tradition, of course,
> required great selectivity. He advanced certain iconic figures
> (meditating Buddhas, dancing Śivas) as central to the tradition,
> while other types (erotic, secular, or female) ended up on the
> periphery. More important, Havell set up Indian art as an Other, as
> based on a fundamentally different aesthetic "ideal" from the
> standard Western canons, but nevertheless as worthy of inclusion
> within an expanded category of "fine art." To appreciate Indian art
> properly, European audiences would be required to understand and
> empathize with this alternative artistic intentionality. From 1910
> through the 1930s, Havell and Coomaraswamy would be the main
> instructors.[179]

Havell is not the only curator accused of filtering his appreciation of India's

iconography through a Western lens that variously sanitized or exoticized its subject.

However, despite the cultural challenges, something important was accomplished.

> Objects that had been termed "idols" in 1900 found themselves
> metamorphosed into works of art. One can specify endpoints to
> this transformation. The taxonomic shift began with the writings of
> E.B. Havell and A.K. Coomaraswamy in the 1910s, and was
> institutionally completed with the great show of "The Art of India
> and Pakistan" held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London,
> 1947–1948. This shift grew out of a a larger intellectual movement
> that we might call, by analogy, indophilia. Certain aspects of
> Indian culture were selected and given a positive valence as
> embodying "spiritual" values, and these were contrasted with the
> negatively valued "materialism" of late Victorian British culture.
> In India this movement was an important part of the gathering
> nationalist, anti-colonial movement, particularly through spiritual
> politicians such as Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Sister Nivedita,

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[178] Mitter (1977). 256.
[179] Davis (1997). 178.

Annie Besant, and the Tagore circle.[180]

But is the line between museum and temple, between art and *mūrti*, so clear-cut?

> In the secular/religious terms of our culture, "ritual" and
> "museums' are antithetical.… Once we question our
> Enlightenment assumptions about the sharp separation between
> religious and secular experience—that the one is rooted in belief
> while the other is based in lucid and objective rationality—we may
> begin to glimpse the hidden—perhaps the better word is
> disguised—ritual content of secular ceremonies.[181]

And yet, there remains as part of the ideal of the museum a function of uplift that is

not unrecognizable to those who look to the aesthetics of religion for their uplift:

> The belief, emanating from German philosophy, in the uplifting
> and harmonizing power of art further informed the spread of
> museum culture in the early nineteenth century. Art had long
> served to inspire religious devotion and loyalty to earthly rulers,
> but the new aesthetics of Kant and Schiller insisted that the beauty
> and autonomy of art could nourish the spirit of the individual
> subject by lifting consciousness above the contingent realities of
> the material world without letting it become lost in abstractions.[182]

Unlike the mind's free flights of interpretation, the process of museum curation is far

from an abstract art. So, let us briefly consider the case of one of the twentieth century's

most respected of Western curators of Indian art, the Austria-born historian Stella

Kramrisch (1896–1993), who became the University of Calcutta's first Professor of

Indian Art (1923–1950), served as Professor of South Asian Art at the University of

Pennsylvania (1950–1969), as curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (1954–1972),

and as Professor of Indian Art at New York University (1964–1982). In the preface to her

book *Indian Sculpture: Ancient, Classical and Mediæval*, Kramrisch cautions against one

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[180] Davis (1997). 177.
[181] Carol Duncan. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 2005). 8.
[182] Andrew McClellan. *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). 21.

common approach European and American critics may take in evaluating India's long

history of art:

> Western terminology cannot be applied without reservation when
> studying Indian art. Western methods of art-criticism, too, have to
> be recast according to the demands of Indian sculpture. Indian
> terms, on the other hand, can also not be employed.… as they
> stand, they do not convey their full meaning to the modern reader,
> and require interpretation which the sculptures themselves supply.
> [183]

But how does such an approach function, in practice? One may easily and without

controversy grant Kramrisch's point that Indian terms—such as *rasa, raudra, bibhatsa*

and *bhayanaka*—are certainly obscure to the typical non-Indian critic, and need not be

employed by those seeking to explain the art.

We may wonder, though: does she go too far with this approach? Kramrisch

optimistically suggests that Indian terms may be omitted because "the sculptures

themselves supply" the needed interpretations, and that focusing on terms would require

another layer of interpretation which she finds unnecessary. Can we somehow weigh her

suggestion objectively? Perhaps we can gain some insight by examining Kramrisch's

above-mentioned book, in which she has given us not just fifty plates containing a wide

spectrum of Indian art, but also fifty-eight pages of text explaining the items on those

plates, along with another hundred-and-forty pages of background commentary and

another thirty pages of notes and index. Significantly, we find no indexed references to

any of the English-language words that might likely stand in for *rasa* (e.g. taste, flavor,

aesthetics). Even throughout the body of the text the closest Kramrisch comes to using a

term even broadly evocative of *rasa* is her discussion of "mood" in various sculptures.

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[183] Kramrisch (2013). x.

Some Indian terms, such as *rasa*, are of course difficult to translate in a way that does not lose some important nuance present in the original term, and there is great value in interpreting Indian art in ways that make it accessible to non-Indians. But do Western interpreters wear self-chosen blinders in performing such a task—blinders that may obscure important value judgments or choices they make without realizing what they have done? In looking at Kramrisch's above-mentioned book there may be evidence of this. Without the tool of *rasa*, we might look at her fifty plates containing more than a hundred images of important artworks, yet not notice the relative prevalence of some themes and the paucity of others.

Consider, for instance, Kramrisch's choice of four portrayals of Durga slaying the demon buffalo Mahisasura. Though even a cursory examination of temple architecture will reveal many vivid portrayals of the goddess as a fierce warrior leaving behind a trail of bloodied opponents, what do we find in Kramrisch's four selections? In three of the four, we find an almost meditative Durga, with relaxed or even placid facial expressions, as the goddess stands calmly with upraised knife over a subdued Mahisasura, waiting to slay her foe much as one might carve a slab of meat. No particular sense of fierce or even energetic battle is conveyed. Even in the fourth plate, which depicts Mahisasura's distressed face upon being conquered, the portrayal is a bit sanitized, at least when compared other widely known depictions of this divine pastime, such as found in J.C. Harle's compendium.[184]

Even Kramrisch's minimal acknowledgement of the goddess Kālī seems to be a bit antiseptic. Though the goddess can elsewhere be found in vibrant poses battling against

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[184] James Coffin Harle. *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). 277.

her foes, Kramrisch shows us a meditative Kālī, seated on a platform with her left leg

bent inward. Her lower arms are outstretched in mudras; her upper arms hold a tiny

trident[185] and a featureless small snake that looks much more like a harmless garden

snake than the fierce serpents with which she is pictured elsewhere. Indeed, looking

through Kramrisch's fifty pages of plates and more than a hundred works of art, one

could draw the mistaken conclusion that Indian art is largely antiseptic; that it favors

restrained portrayals rather than intense and vivid depictions and that it eschews the gory

in favor of the meditative.

The most gruesome portrayals Kramrisch allows us to see are two images of

Narasiṃha—one she describes as "morbid elegance combined with a pose of power"[186]

and one she derides as "linear and angular."[187] Here we see what may be an even stronger

indication of an interpretive choice colored by some of the same discomfort found by

early British visitors to India, who lacked the framework of *rasa* to help explicate a

difficult image and make it apprehensible. Kramrisch's Image 89, Plate XXXVII (see

Appendix A), shows a human figure with contented facial expression, embraced by at

least three of Narasiṃha's arms. Significantly, in light of the Narasiṃha story, the human

figure has one foot on the ground while in the man-lion's embrace. Kramrisch describes

it as follows:

> Narasiṁha, in enclosure wall of Mahādeva temple, Candpur,
> Jhansi. Twelfth century…. The facial physiognomy resumes that of
> the composition; angular in every instance, that of Narasiṁha is
> based on the rectangle and square, with which go the wide-open
> jaws, the wide-open eye, whereas that of Hirṇyakaśipu, triangular
> and pointed, harbours the derision of a closed mouth and defiantly

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[185] Kramrisch calls the implement a *trisula*. Despite her insistence that Indian terms may helpfully be set aside for Westerners' understanding, her descriptions are sometimes a seemingly arbitrary blend of translated and untranslated terms.
[186] Kramrisch (2013). 185.
[187] Ibid. 188.

slanting eyes.[188]

Kramrisch's identification of Narasiṃha is difficult to dispute; the *avatāra* is portrayed in a style particular to the period and to the skill of the artist, and seems accurately to reflect what we know about this figure. Most puzzling, though, is her identification of the second figure. Recall the Narasiṃha story as previously mentioned; Hiranyakaśipu could be killed "neither on the ground or in the air." This figure has a foot on the ground. Furthermore, where Kramrisch reports "the derision of a closed mouth" does it not in fact seem that the figure has a relaxed smile and is offering absolutely no resistance but in fact is relishing Narasiṃha's embrace? Reflecting on the myth, is it not far more likely that the artist has given us a successful portrayal of Hiranyakaśipu's son Prahlad, rather than a failed portrayal of Hiranyakaśipu? Is it possible that Kramrisch, like British visitors to India three centuries before, was not able to see in such an image the loving devotion of the young *bhakta* Prahlad to the man-lion *avatāra* whose fierceness is directed at enemies, not friends.

Is Kramrisch consciously or unconsciously functioning as a kind of censor, wanting as an Indophile to present India's best, yet rejecting some items and interpretations because of her Western conditioning? Some may find it significant that although Kramrisch shows us five images from the famous Khajuraho temple complex, only one, her Figure 91[189], shows an erotic embrace—a *maithuna* couple. Compare this to other more comprehensive depictions of Khajuraho artwork, such as the Lakshman Temple piece depicting a man engaged in coitus with a small horse, behind whom we see an onlooker with hands covering her eyes, yet with one of her eyes peeking through.

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[188] Stella Kramrisch. *The Presence of Śiva*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). 189.
[189] Ibid. 190.

Clearly, the sculptors at Khajuraho were not shy about depicting the range of human activity, nor even were they hesitant to depict some of that activity as disreputable (viz. the covered eyes) though still of prurient interest (viz. the onlooker peeking through a covering hand).

Further evidence of this tendency toward filtering may be found in Kramrisch's *The Presence of Śiva*. Despite the range of Śiva's pastimes described throughout the text, the book ends with thirty-two plates of carvings that manage to avoid depicting Śiva in any of his most violent or discomforting poses. We see erotic and meditative poses, but the range of visual imagery does not match the range of stories told throughout the text.   We read of Rudra the Wild Hunter,[190] born of the anger of Prajapati[191]—the piercer of Prajapati[192] and piercer of the heart of the antelope.[193] We read of Śiva severing the heads of Brahma[194] and Dakśa.[195] We read of Śiva swallowing the venomous world-poison yet remaining unharmed.[196] Yet we see none of these portrayed in image. Even the Nataraja images among the end-of-book plates are cropped so as to emphasize the meditative face and to obscure such violent details as a crushed demon underfoot.[197] Nevertheless, let us not be too harsh. Kramrisch comes across as very much a respectful Indophile when we compare her curation of challenging materials against others' oppressively Western theoretical approaches to aesthetic matters.

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[190] Stella Kramrisch. *The Presence of Śiva*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). 8.
[191] Ibid. 100.
[192] Ibid. 326.
[193] Ibid. 328.
[194] Ibid. 259.
[195] Ibid. 355.
[196] Ibid. 152.
[197] Ibid. 515–547.

Considering the example of even such an Indophile as Kramrisch, is it any surprise that earlier Western interpreters construed India's *mūrtis* as they did? What would we expect of a British observer, familiar with only the most sedate worship and the most abstract notions of God in action? Where some may approach *rasa* theory as the indigenous way to look at the indigenous art forms of India, others will offer instead a wide range of Western theoretical constructs by which to understand the aesthetics of Indian art—even if such "understanding" may bear very little resemblance to what Indian artists intended when they constructed their works.

And yet, something significant has happened. Images that in the seventeenth century drew cries of "Idolatry! Devils! Barbarism!" may in fact have found a voice, even in museum captivity. "But these images in museums aren't being worshipped," some might complain, suggesting that the images have been shorn from their original context. And yet, we cannot forget that the religious theory underlying *mūrti* is at its root an aesthetic theory. Not only are today's Western observers more likely than in previous centuries to appreciate *in situ* the multitude of *mūrtis* that animate Indian religious life; the Westerner who comes no closer than a museum display may now have access to the aesthetic experience that was the murti's purpose in the first place.

So, we have come full-circle. We have seen that within India's indigenous religious traditions *mūrti* has for millennia found its place both for what it is, and what it does. What it is, is an instrument that allows the worshipper to make a felt connection to an otherwise-ineffable divinity. What it does, is create *rasa*—emotional experience— through which worshippers are lifted out of their ordinary experience into a liminal state, a hierophany. It has done so with such power that it has resisted the reasoned critique of

Indian and Western critics alike. It has expanded outside of India, following the Indian diaspora where it can make itself known to new host cultures. And even in museums it has even found a place outside of the temple—a place where even untutored observers may experience for themselves some semblance of what has allowed *mūrti* to persist for thousands of years.

> For wherever the hand moves, there the glances follow;
> Where the glances go, the mind follows;
> Where the mind goes, the mood follows;
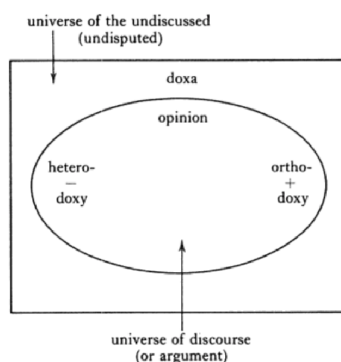> Where the mood goes, there is the flavour (*rasa*).[198]

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[198] Coomaraswamy (2010). 17.

CONCLUSION

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, describing the range of assumed knowledge that within a system "goes without saying," introduces the concept of *doxa*—the realm of ideas that remain undiscussed because they are undisputed.

> The adherence expressed in the doxic relation to the social world is the absolute form of recognition of legitimacy through misrecognition of arbitrariness, since it is unaware of the very question of legitimacy, which arises from competition for legitimacy, and hence from conflict between groups claiming to possess it.[199]

Bourdieu offers a simple diagram to help us visualize this concept:

universe of the undiscussed
(undisputed)

doxa

opinion

hetero-
—
doxy

ortho-
+
doxy

universe of discourse
(or argument)

This is not merely an academic principle of epistemology; colloquial expressions of this concept can even be found in modern American popular culture, as when U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously observed during a press conference:

> There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.[200]

Rumsfeld did not originate the phrasing of the "unknown unknown"—it can be found in the poetry of David Herbert Lawrence[201] and had found its way into American public

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[199] Pierre Bourdieu. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). 168.
[200] News Briefing. U.S. Department of Defense. February 12, 2002.
[201] In Lawrence's "New Heaven and Earth" (1917) we find the lines:

policy discussions by the 1960s.[202] Yet, whether we take it from Bourdieu, Lawrence,

Rumsfeld or elsewhere, an awareness that one's "universe of discourse" is defined and

limited by the unexamined *doxa* can help us understand many social interactions.

In examining colonial Britons encountering India, we must remember that not only

was "Hinduism" a constructed category; "religion" itself was a constructed category that

could be defined variously depending on an observer's assumptions and contexts. When

examined alongside the Abrahamic faiths—certainly in the case of the Christian religion

of the British missionaries who brought their faith to India—"religion" is a much

narrower category than the Indian concept of *dharma*—a distinction that can make

comparisons difficult if not approached with care. Long before Muslims or Christians

encountered India, the subcontinent accommodated a wide variety of beliefs and practices

under the broad umbrella of its *dharma* traditions, within which we find substantial

variety among the variety of devotional and philosophical approaches one might take in

relation to divinity.

By way of comparison, we might in early modern Europe find a wide variety of

practices and beliefs among diverse individuals all calling themselves "Christian," such

that an outside observer might find it difficult to discern the common belief and practice

shared by all those claiming that identification as their own. In India, however, before

the invention of "Hinduism," the landscape was more complex. If there were a unifying

term akin to "Christianity" it might be *sanatana-dharma*—the overarching corpus of

texts and traditions going back to the *Ṛg Veda*. And yet, within *sanatana-dharma* the

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"Now here was I, new-awakened, with my hand stretching out and touching the unknown,
the real unknown, the unknown unknown."
[202] John J. Bennett, *DOD Systems Acquisition Management: Congressional Criticism and Concern*, n.p., 1969. 101.

range of belief and practice is so broad and accommodating that the term does not meaningfully parallel "Christianity," given the tremendous variety existing under the umbrella of *sanatana-dharma*.

Interestingly, *mūrti* may be one of the most widely embraced details shared among India's *dharma* traditions. Iconoclastic movements exist, as we have seen, but are marginal across the broad scope of Hinduism. Yet, where they do exist, their existence stands in opposition to the accepting and tolerant embrace so common elsewhere in the tradition. Under the umbrella of *sanatana-dharma* or even of Hinduism, those who have a strong devotion toward one form of divinity or another may not feel any need to deprecate those who prefer another. One worshipper's chosen deity (*iśta-deva*) does not preclude or oppose another's different choice. Yes, some philosophically minded Hindus may deprecate image-worship as less lofty a practice than their own cogitations, but they generally do so without rejecting the practice for others. What stands outside the broad tradition is the iconoclasts' notion that "true Hinduism" is practiced by just a few iconoclasts and that the majority of self-identified Hindus are benighted souls engaged in primitive practices (or worse). How ironic that it is these iconoclasts who in their way echo the first untutored Western observers who were wont to shout "Satans! Molochs!" upon encountering India's *mūrti* traditions, India's aniconic movements have sought to set themselves above those who embrace the use of *mūrti*, and in doing so have in an important sense set themselves apart.

Perhaps, then, we can consider with some empathy the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britons who visited India and found it to be a land filled with devil-images and devil-worshippers. With the distance of time and greater knowledge, we can now

understand that colonial Europe, in encountering the unknowns of the Indian subcontinent, interpreted the diversity of Indian beliefs and practices through the lens of a constructed category originally so broad as to include what we now recognize as the traditions descending from Gautama Buddha and his followers as well as the Jain community. Yet, so successful was the British critique of their colony's indigenous religious life that by the time Britain's Queen Victoria assumed the title "Empress of India" in 1876, there was already well underway a "Bengal Renaissance" that in significant ways reflected the acceptance, by figures such as Rammohun Roy and the Brahmo Samaj, as well as Dayananda Sarasvati and his Arya Samaj, of a notion of "Hinduism" which they adapted for their own religious and polemic purposes. The reformers' goal became not simply the revival of an assumed prior indigenous culture; it became the reform of a "Hinduism" that prior to the British would not have been so readily classified and thus potentially malleable.

More importantly, in considering these interpretive choices and their associated difficulties, we are not just discussing observers from many centuries ago. In some ways, we are examining a phenomenon that includes ourselves. In seeing how a Robert Southey or a Rammohun Roy or a Stella Kramrisch evaluated India's use of *mūrti*, we find that we are also examining a broader question: "What are we doing when within a culture we use another culture's categories and boundaries to understand our own, or when we use our categories to understand another culture?" Are we inevitably studying ourselves and our own culture, or are there "best practices" to help us understand another culture without distortion as we mediate it through our own? By examining the case of colonized India, we may gain insight into this broader question. Is it possible that the

difference between a Robert Southey and a Stella Kramrisch is not a difference of kind,

but rather a difference of degree—albeit an extreme difference? Is it possible that even a

sympathetic observe like Kramrisch, versed in India's traditions far more than the typical

Western-born student of things Indian, brought to her curation either an unconscious

filter that prevented her from tasting *rasa* that she found unpleasant, or a conscious sense

that as a curator she had to accommodate her audiences' taste? Similarly, if these are

possible, surely it is equally possible that the interpretations and contexts brought forward

in this thesis are subject to those same limitations. In pointing out that other interpreters

have been captives of their *doxa*, I am unavoidably pointing a finger back at myself.

How, then, to minimize the problem? Perhaps the very act of scholarship—gaining

greater familiarity with one's field of study, from as many different angles of vision as

possible—is the best answer we have, if we want to expand our *doxa* so that we can not

only find new answers to our questions, but find new questions that will help us better

understand our study.

On that measured-but-hopeful note, let us conclude by asking: What have we seen?

We have seen that within India's indigenous religious traditions *mūrti* has for millennia

found its place both for what it is, and what it does. What it is, is an instrument that

allows the worshipper to make a felt connection to an otherwise-ineffable divinity. What

it does, is express *rasa*—emotional experience—through which worshippers are lifted out

of their ordinary experience into a liminal state, a hierophany. Despite encompassing

some of the unpleasant emotions within its framework, it has done so with such power

that the use of *mūrti* has resisted the reasoned objections of Indian and Western critics

alike. It has expanded outside of India, following the Indian diaspora where it can make

itself known to new host cultures. And even in museums it has even found a place outside of the temple—a place where even untutored observers may taste for themselves some of the *rasa* that has allowed *mūrti* to persist for thousands of years.

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APPENDIX: KRAMRISCH NARASIṂHA PLATE

Plate XXXVIII, Image 89, from: Kramrisch, Stella. *Indian Sculpture: Ancient, Classical and Mediæval*. (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2013). Notice the male figure in front with feet on the ground, with lips upturned in a smile while in the embrace of the four-armed figure with tail.