

A CONSIDERATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN RELIGIOUS RITUAL AND THEATRE
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
HINDU FORMS OF WORSHIP

by

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the relationship between religious ritual and theatre through an examination of the manner in which the Hindu religion functions. In the Introduction to this thesis, the nature of both religious rituals and theatre, and the similarities that exist between these forms of performance, are explored.

At the heart of any performance is the desire to communicate. Religious rituals are primarily a means of communicating the philosophy of a particular religion. In this thesis, the basic beliefs and philosophy of the Hindu religion are described; the imagery, symbols and mythology, that have evolved with the religion, are analysed as extensions of the basic philosophy of the religion; and the manner in which these symbols and images function in Hindu religious practices is examined. This is followed by a detailed documentation of two Hindu rituals. The first, the *Havan* is a home based ritual, while the second, the Fire-Walking Festival, is temple based. The historical evolution of these rituals, based on essentially scriptural evidence, is also examined.

An overview of the impact of the Hindu religion on Indian theatre concludes this dissertation.

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation, unless otherwise stated, is my original work.

.....

28 November 1991

SIGNATURE

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INTRODUCTION

RELIGIOUS RITUAL AND THEATRE

A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

Man is inherently a performer. Pickering states that:

the urge to mimic, the need to act out some aspect of life and the concomitant belief that this acting out in some mysterious way affects the natural world - has been with humanity from its earliest beginnings.¹

It is through performance that man obtains a greater understanding and awareness of himself and the world around him. This is observable amongst children who play games in which they assume characters, develop situations and resolve problems. When children play house, they recreate the domestic situation as they experience and perceive it. Play "expresses a child's relation to himself and his environment."²

Play becomes performance when it is directed to an audience with the expectation of a reaction. Often children are asked to recite a nursery rhyme or sing a song to a grandparent, relative or friend. The child accedes to this request and is rewarded with a verbal

or non-verbal reaction from his audience. In this manner the child transforms play, which is essentially a form of recreation designed to amuse oneself, into a performance, which is an action that is shared with others.

In many communities a child's early religious training is achieved through play and performance. Many religious hymns and chants are taught to children in the same way as nursery rhymes are taught. Positive reaction to the child's performance of these hymns and other religious actions, such as putting one's palms together and closing one's eyes, aid the learning process and reinforce these actions in the child.

I first became aware of the fascinating relationship between religious rituals and performance as a child. One of the major festivals observed by Hindu households is an annual celebration dedicated to the Goddess Sarasvathi. This festival, which occurs during the period September/October each year and is commonly referred to as *Sarasvathi Pooja* is of special significance to children. Sarasvathi is the Hindu Goddess of knowledge and Hindu parents observe this festival as a means of ensuring that their progeny is successful in life.

The festival is observed over a twenty-one day period during which time those participating were expected to abstain from meat and take part in a nightly ritual before a picture of the Goddess. Symbols of educational and artistic pursuit, such as books or a musical instrument, would be placed in front of the picture, after which the participants would sing hymns in praise of Sarasvathi and make offerings of flowers to her image. On the final day of the festival parents would accompany their children to the local temple. Before departing for the temple, each child would first collect twenty-one flowers to represent the number of days during which the festival was observed.

At the temple the children would seat themselves on the floor facing a life size statue of the Goddess Sarasvathi seated on a lotus blossom. The priest would then summon all the children to stand in a group in the empty space before the statue. The priest would begin a chant and at the end of each verse of the chant the children would make an offering of a flower to the statue. Once all the offerings were made, the children would remain in front of the statue and sing hymns, during which they would form a circle and perform a folk dance called *gommi*.

A feature of the dance is the rhythm which is in simple four-four time. The older boys would use small hand-

held cymbals, called *thalam*, to maintain this rhythm, while the rest of the children would clap out the rhythm. As the children moved in a circle, they would clap at the level of their ankles, then at the level of their waists and finally above their heads. These three beats would then be followed by a rest beat. At a certain point the rhythm would get faster until it reached a crescendo. Thereafter the rhythm gradually slowed down and subsided into a final beat.

RELIGIOUS RITUALS

Religion is essentially a system of beliefs which a particular community holds to be true. This system of beliefs is usually based upon a philosophy which supplies answers to questions about the unknown. Corrigan states that "the need to confront the mystery of existence is deeply rooted in human nature."³ Religion attempts to explain "the mystery of existence" and at the same time it provides answers to the mysteries of creation and death. In this manner religion helps to bring order to an otherwise chaotic world and assists man as he journeys through life towards death.

A necessary part of religion is worship. Since religion attempts to explain the mysteries of life as being

governed by a superhuman being - a God, it behoves man to pay homage to this mighty force. This is done in worship - an action in which man attempts to come to terms with the philosophy of his religion and the reality of his life. By means of these religious actions or rituals, man attempts to act out his understanding of his religion and gains a closer understanding of his relation to his God. Turner points out that "religion is not a cognitive system, a set of dogmas, alone, it is meaningful experience and experienced meaning."⁴ In this thesis, the term "religious ritual" is used to describe any formalized action that helps to bring religion to life and extends the religious experience of the individual.

THEATRE

The word "theatre" has its origins in the Greek word *Theatron* which means "seeing place". This could mean:

1. a physical structure from which one observes
2. new insights gained after having observed.⁵

From this we may conclude that there are four essential ingredients to any act of theatre:

1. an observer
2. a performer

3. an exchange of ideas between performer and observer that leads to new insights
4. a space that is common to both the observer and performer.

Scheckner adds a further dimension to theatre when he states:

Theatre is doing something "make believe" or "in play". Events are tried out that might otherwise only be imagined.⁶

The actions performed within the theatrical space are not real, they are imitations of reality or one's expectations of how things might occur in reality. These actions are necessarily based on one's perception of reality which is shaped by one's philosophy of life.

THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN RELIGIOUS RITUALS AND THEATRE

Religious rituals and theatre share a number of common elements although they differ in the essential purposes they serve. Religious rituals are performances designed to bring about a closer understanding of man's relationship with God, while theatre deals primarily with "humans' relationships with themselves, their fellow humans, and their existences."⁷ Religious rituals and theatre function along similar lines to

achieve these goals. These similarities will now be discussed.

THE PERFORMANCE SPACE

Common to both religious rituals and theatre is the need for a performance space. Brook states that he "can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged."⁸ Throughout the history of the theatre all types of performance spaces have been utilized as theatrical venues. In medieval Europe theatre took to the streets in the form of pageant wagons; travelling companies of performers played in inn-yards in Tudor England; and during the English Restoration, indoor tennis courts were converted to house theatrical performances. Theatre does not require any special performance space - it is capable of adapting to any "empty space". Devlin points out that the basic "requirement of a theatre space is that it should allow people to gather round to watch and hear the performers."⁹

The religious ritual, too, may be performed in any space. Because the subject matter of these rituals is God and man's relationship with Him, the space in which these rituals are performed takes on a special meaning

for both the performers and the observer. The space has to be made worthy for contemplation upon God. This may be achieved by performing certain rituals which are designed to sanctify and consecrate the space or the space might simply be cleaned and made suitable for paying homage to God. Most often the performance space is contained within a specially constructed building, such as a temple, mosque or church, that commemorates God's presence on earth. Special buildings designed specifically for the performance of religious rituals are not necessary. In ritual, as in theatrical presentations, any vacant space (which takes on a special meaning for the duration of the ritual) may be used.

THE PERFORMER

The performer is the focal point of any performance. He serves as a medium through which a message is transmitted to the observers present.

In religious rituals, the priest is the chief performer. He acts as a link between man and God, and as such, he determines the sequence of actions to be performed and the manner in which these actions are to be executed. Because of the intermediary and directorial functions he performs, the priest stands apart from other participants and observers at a

ritual. His special role may be enhanced in this by the specific costume he wears. The observers in a ritual may also become performers. In these instances the performance is directed to an audience that is not physically present - God.

The performer in a theatrical event performs a specific function - he brings life to characters which have, to that point, existed only in the imagination or on a page. Archer states that the success of a performer is dependent upon his interaction with his audience. He adds:

Actors literally work with and for the audience, the performers' function being to stimulate an appropriate response to an appropriate degree from each audience.¹⁰

By assuming a role, other than his own, the performer is attempting to recreate his interpretation of a specific character. The success of this interpretation may be measured by the reaction of his audience to the performance.

THE AUDIENCE

In assessing the role of the audience in a theatrical experience, Wilson makes the following observation:

When an audience comes to witness a performance, an exchange takes place between performers and spectators; the two groups engage in a form of communication or a celebration. At its best, theatre affords members of the audience an opportunity to be transported outside themselves or to look deep inside themselves.¹¹

For this to be achieved the theatre makes special demands on the audience. At the outset the audience has to indulge the performers by accepting that the actions being performed are occurring at that moment, that is, they exist in the present tense and not in some remote past. This necessarily means that the audience has to accept the authenticity of stage reality as opposed to the reality of everyday life (physical reality). Stage reality is dependent upon the use of symbols. Even the most realistic set is a reproduction, an imitation of reality. Since nothing that occurs in the performance space is real, theatre is essentially symbolic. The audience has to interpret these symbols and, for the duration of the performance, accept the imaginary world being played out as a slice of reality.

The audience is assisted in achieving this by the very nature of theatre which has been described as "a group effort".¹² Hatlen states that in a theatre the audience loses individual identities and assumes a crowd identification. The implication of this is that the individual in the audience loses his reserve and, as a

part of the larger group, he responds more easily to theatrical stimuli. Hatlen adds:

There is the pressure to conform, the contagion to join in. These psychological phenomena of audience behaviour are at least a partial explanation of how the effectiveness of a play may be enhanced by a responsive audience, which willingly suspends its disbelief and succumbs to the emotions of the play.¹³

The observer at a religious ritual also enters a world of "make believe" which is composed largely of religious symbols. Turner describes the manner in which symbols function in a religious ritual:

In ritual one lives through events, or through the alchemy of its framings and symbolings, relives semiogenetic events, the deeds and words of prophets and saints, or if these are absent, myths and sacred epics.¹⁴

[For the religious experience to be meaningful to the observer, the symbols that are used in its rituals have to be understood.] This is made easy simply because individuals are generally raised to accept the beliefs of a particular religion.] In this way the individual's understanding and acceptance of religious concepts and symbols are internalized and his response to them become almost automatic. Before observing a ritual, the adherents of a particular religion are already aware of the sequence of actions and understand the needs that

these rituals serve in experiencing religious beliefs. Participation, even through observation, is a reaffirmation of one's commitment to a particular religion.)

Southern calls theatre "a reactive art."¹⁵ This is also true of religious rituals. Both forms of performance only exist in active participation. In each instance the observers become participants when they react to the actions being performed before them. Southern concludes:

...the ground which is best suited to germinate the seeds of theatre is the public assembly, or originally the tribal gathering. Here can accumulate that reservoir of what is comprehended under the term 'group psychology', which provides the power upon which the player can draw; the carrier-wave as it were on which he can impose his communication.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Most texts or sections of texts dealing with the history of the theatre begin with an assumption similar to Brockett's:

The theatre is so old that its origins are lost in prehistory; when human records began people were already performing rituals which involved most of the elements required for a fully developed theatre: a performance space, performers, action, masks or make-up,

costumes, music, dance, and an audience.¹⁷

The basic premise is that theatre and religious rituals share the same roots, but at a later stage they separated, and theatre evolved into an art form in its own right. The reason for this separation is that each of these forms of performance serves a different purpose: theatre being essentially secular and religious rituals being spiritual. The situation in Medieval Europe illustrates the manner in which this separation was effected. The medieval church used drama as a means of educating its congregation in religious doctrines. When the plays began to intrude upon the liturgy, the church was faced with a dilemma. Ronald Harwood sums up this dilemma with the following illustration:

Herod was an evil man, and the question arose, should evil be perpetrated in the house of God? Furthermore, was it right that a priest should impersonate such a figure? Was it blasphemy? For the time being, the solution was both theatrical and human: the character of Herod took over the Nativity plays - the villain proved irresistible.¹⁸

The solution to this particular problem was that the role of Herod was portrayed by a layman instead of a priest. Soon secular elements began to creep into the performances inside the church. This was one of the

reasons for theatrical performances being moved outside the church where they were organized and performed by the trade guilds. This set the stage for drama and theatre to pursue a more secular direction in Europe.

In this study I examine the relationship between religious rituals and theatre by using the Hindu religion as the basis for my investigation. The manner in which religious rituals are performed is determined by the philosophy and history of a religion. In Chapter One the basic beliefs and philosophy of the Hindu religion are described. I then examine the influence of the religion in shaping the Hindu's outlook to life as this directly affects the manner in which the religion is practised. In Chapter Two the imagery, symbols and mythology, that have evolved with the religion, are analysed as extensions of the basic philosophy of the religion. The manner in which these symbols and images function in Hindu religious practices is described in Chapter Three. This is followed by a detailed documentation of two Hindu rituals in Chapters Four and Five. The first is a home based ritual, while the second is temple based. In the analysis of these rituals parallels between the elements of theatre and religious rituals are examined. The historical evolution of these rituals, based on essentially scriptural evidence, as well as the use of symbols and imagery, is also examined. Finally, an examination of

the impact of the Hindu religion on Indian theatre
concludes this dissertation.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ESSENCE OF HINDUISM

The word 'Hindu' was originally a geographic term used to describe a group of people who "occupied the territory drained by the Sindu (the Indus) river system...."¹ The term is all embracing and continues to be used to describe the civilization, way of life, philosophy and religion of these people. It is significant that it is a geographic term which is used to describe the religion of these people since Hinduism has no single founder - unlike other religions of the world. Hindus themselves use the term *Dharma* to describe their religion.

Dharma is sometimes prefixed by the words *Vedic* or *Sanatan* to describe the religion. The adjective *Vedic* describes the teachings and philosophy of the Vedas while *Sanatan* is a Sanskrit term which means ageless, timeless or eternal. D.S. Sarma states:

Dharma in its widest sense is the law of one's being. But in a restricted sense it connotes the moral law.²

Swami Nirvedananda defines *Dharma* as:

Derived from the Sanskrit root *dhri* (to hold), *dharma* stands for that which holds up the existence of a thing.³

Dharma appears to be much more than a mere code of ethics or moral law which governs man, but extends further to include the government and guidance of his inner being as well. *Dharma* is very often referred to, amongst Hindus, as a goal to be reached or a state of being towards which to strive.

THE HINDU SCRIPTURES

The Hindu religion or *dharma* seeks to define existence by listing the goals of existence and then supplying a means towards achieving these. These teachings are contained in holy texts which are collectively called *Shastras*.

The *Shastras* fall into two broad categories: *Sruti* and *Smriti*. *Sruti* means revealed or that which is heard. The Hindu belief is that the truths, contained in the *sruti*, were revealed by God to the ancient seers or *rishis*. Not much is known about these seers since the belief is that the truths were of more importance than the persons to whom they were revealed. These revelations are set down in scriptures called the *Vedas*. The *Vedas* are regarded as the primary source of the Hindu religion and form the foundation upon which much of the philosophy and doctrines of the religion are built.

There are four *Vedas*: the *Rig Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sama Veda* and the *Atharva Veda*. Each *Veda* is divided into three sections: the *Mantras*, the *Brahmanas* and the *Upanishads*. The *Mantras* are hymns celebrating the power and glory of the various *Vedic* gods while the *Brahmanas* are manuals relating to the performance of rituals. For many Hindus the most important section of the *Vedas* are the *Upanishads*. These are intellectual treatises which deal with the nature of God, the goals of existence and the manner in which these goals can be achieved. Since much of the *Upanishads* is lofty philosophy dealing with abstractions and metaphysics, they were not easily comprehended by the masses and had to be explained to them. It is these explanations and interpretations of the *Upanishads* which constitute the *Smriti*.

Smriti refers collectively to all Hindu scriptures except the *Vedas*. Many Hindu scholars consider the *smriti* to be the secondary texts of Hinduism since they are based on the teachings of the *Vedas*. The *smriti* are many in number and include the teachings of many Hindu sages and saints. The *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* are considered the most important *smriti*. Both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are epic poems which teach the essence of the *Vedas* in story form. The *Puranas* deal with myths and legends of the Hindu Pantheon. Many Hindu rituals and beliefs have been to a great extent, influenced by these three works.

GOD AND GODS

Upon encountering Hinduism for the first time, one is left with the distinct impression that it is a polytheistic religion in which idols and animals, amongst other things, are worshipped. The *Rig Veda* celebrates, in its various hymns, many gods. These gods represent the cosmic energy which manifests itself in nature and in man. Amongst these gods one encounters *Indra*, the warrior king who is god of the storm; *Agni*, the messenger god of fire; *Usas*, the god of the dawn; the wind god, *Vayu*; *Surya*, the sun god and *Pusan*, a pastoral god.

In each of the hymns of the *Rig Veda* one god is given prominence while others occupy a subordinate position. Another feature of the presentation of the gods in the *Rig Veda* is the manner in which the personality of one god appears to merge with that of another god so that no separate identity between the two seems to exist. Zaehner observes that the ancient sages, "in extolling their gods, tended to attribute to them qualities borrowed from other deities; in the particular god they addressed they tended to see the greatest of them all, and this in turn led to an outright identification of one with another or with all."⁴

The Vedic gods (as many as 33 are referred to in one passage of the Vedas) soon lost much of their importance as Hindus began to recognise just three important facets of Brahman: Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer. Each of these facets were then identified with three lesser Vedic gods: *Brahma* - the creator, *Vishnu* - the Sustainer, and *Siva* - the destroyer. Margaret Stutley states: "By the first century AD most educated Hindus were either *Vaisnavas* or *Saivas*."⁸ *Vaisnavas* refers to the followers of *Vishnu*, while *Saivas* refers to the followers of *Shiva*.

She adds:

Although the Vedic gods lost their supremacy they never disappeared completely, since Hindus never suppress any divinity or belief but merely add new ones. As all beings are expressions of the external divine essence, they are essentially non-different from one another.⁹

Another interesting feature of this period was the development of *Saktism* - the worship of the mother goddess, the female counterpart of the Ultimate Reality - *Brahman*. *Sakti* represents the creative energy within the Cosmos.

Amongst Hindus in South Africa the cults of *Vaishnavism*, *Saivism* and *Saktism* are popularly practised and many Hindu rituals have their origins in one or more of these cults.

THE BASIC BELIEFS OF HINDUISM

In attempting this description of the Hindu faith I shall only deal with those features which aid in understanding the rituals to be discussed later. Since the religion is an ancient one, many interpretations and philosophical discourses regarding its various features have evolved. This in turn has resulted in many schools of thought and branches of the religion. Although there may be many differences of opinion regarding different aspects of the religion, all these schools of thought are united in their acceptance of certain essential beliefs. I shall deal with what I consider to be "these essential beliefs".

CREATION

The Hindu's view of life and existence is inextricably linked to its view of creation. For the Hindu there is no absolute beginning nor end to the creation of the universe. Creation is seen as an ongoing process: there is a constant process of creation and dissolution through eternity. The universe manifests itself and is then absorbed into Brahma. This process of manifestation and dissolution is called the *Days and Nights of Brahma*. A day of Brahma is the period of manifestation of the universe, while the night occurs

when Brahma absorbs the universe into himself. The days and nights of Brahma are thought to be infinite.¹⁰

Based on this beginninglessness and endlessness of creation, a number of myths regarding the origins of the universe have evolved. The earliest of these is to be found in the *Rig Veda*.

A number of hymns in the *Rig Veda* allude to the creation. The most famous and important of these is the *Purusha Sukta* or *Hymn to Purusha*. In this hymn, creation is the result of a sacrifice in which a part of *Purusha* is offered as an oblation. *Purusha* in this hymn is presented as a fantastic primordial man:

A thousand-headed is the Man
with a thousand eyes, a thousand
feet;
encompassing the earth all sides.¹¹

Because of this presentation of *Purusha* (Man), many scholars have interpreted *Purusha* as being God since the "thousand eyes, a thousand feet" could be the metaphoric means the ancient seers had at their disposal, to present the omnipotence of God.

The hymn further states:

Three fourths of Man ascended high,
one fourth took birth again down
here.
From this he spread in all
directions
into animate and inanimate things.¹²

In this stanza of the hymn, Purusha is the universe while at the same time he transcends it. Later in the hymn a sacrifice is performed in which Purusha is used as the oblation. From this sacrifice the world comes into being: creatures that inhabit the air and the earth, the *Vedas*, the various gods and the classes of men that would constitute a smoothly functioning community.

The importance of this hymn lies in the fact that it presents, in cryptic form, the foundation upon which Hindu life and thought are built. The sacrifice which resulted in the creation of the universe, becomes an important symbol in religious rituals and is seen as the means towards achieving oneness with God.

A more popular myth regarding the creation occurs in the *Bhagavatam Purana*. This myth is more accessible and does not present any interpretative problems for the average Hindu. In this myth God or *Brahman* is identified with *Vishnu*. Since Hindus believe that all the gods emanate from the one supreme being, it is quite common to find, in Hindu scriptures, a particular deity being given supreme powers. The *Bhagavatam Purana* celebrates the god Vishnu. Hence he is given supreme powers.

In this myth God (referred to as Vishnu) is deep in thought as he floats upon the cosmic ocean while reclining on *Naga*, the king of the serpents. While God is in this state of meditation a full blown lotus emerges from Him. The lotus contains the potential for creation and all the materials necessary. Brahma comes forth from within the lotus and immediately looks in all directions to see if anyone else is present. For this reason Brahma is often referred to as The Four-Faced Brahma. Brahma has no recollection of any of his previous existences. He becomes restless and has a deep desire for knowledge. He realizes that this knowledge must be within himself. He finally finds Truth and God in himself and sees God everywhere. God then asks Brahma to create the world as he has often done in the past. Brahma enters the heart of the lotus and divides it into three sections thus creating heaven, earth and the sky. Brahma also gives the world the *Vedas*. The first humans created are saints, who having been created, fall into deep meditation.¹³ Brahma sees no possibility of propagation amongst these saints. While meditating upon what to do, Brahma's own form divides itself into two: one half becoming man, the other becoming woman.

From these myths regarding the creation, the following points become apparent:

1. God exists before the creation of anything else.
2. There is one God. All other gods emanate from the one God. Thus Brahma, God of Creation, has been created by God to help in the creation of the universe.
3. Brahma has the ability to create and dissolve the universe and has done so many times previously.
4. The entire universe originated from God. Everything on earth, both animate and inanimate, is a part of God since its source of being is God.
5. The *Vedas*, which are given to the world by Brahma, is believed to be the property of all mankind and not just the inhabitants of the Indian sub-continent. It is for this reason that Hinduism is tolerant of all forms of religious beliefs. The rationale being that if any individual's *dharma* is assisted, he may follow any path he desires.

For Hindus the ultimate reality is God since all material manifestations, both animate and inanimate, have originated from God. For Sarma "the ultimate Reality in the universe is pure Spirit - pure Being, Consciousness and Bliss."¹⁴ This "pure Spirit" is viewed as being infinite in both time and space and it

is from this spirit that the manifested Reality (the universe) composed of both spirit and matter, which Hindus call *atman* and *anatman* respectively, comes into being.

Although they believe that every material object that exists in nature possesses a spirit or soul, Hindus find the need to explain this view by stating that all material objects are differentiated according to the state of the soul. In inanimate matter the soul is said to lie dormant.

Stones, rocks and water would therefore be amongst the lowest forms of material objects while man, whose soul has the potential for closeness with God, would be the highest form of material reality. Between these two points lie the other material manifestations of God, which include plants and animals. The state of the spirit or soul is the major determining factor in deciding who or what occupies the positions closest to and furthest away from God.

THE GOALS OF HINDUISM

The ultimate goal in life, for the Hindu, is the realization of God. With this realization *Moksha* is attained. K. Balasubrahmanya Iyer states that *Moksha*

"literally means deliverance, that is, deliverance of the soul from bondage...."¹⁵ The soul is believed to be trapped within a material body and is released from this imprisoned state to return to the spirit of God. The release or liberation of the soul is only attained on the realization of the ultimate Truth. Death of the material body does not automatically mean a return to God. The soul may be re-born in a material body a number of times and only released when the goal in life - God realization - has been achieved.

Once the individual soul is allowed to return to the spirit of God, that soul is said to have achieved a state of *nirvana* or eternal bliss. Although the soul enters the spirit of God, it can never identify with God "since even in *moksha* the soul is still a servant, united with God but under his feet."¹⁶ Hinduism or *Dharma*, then, becomes the means towards achieving *moksha* which leads to *nirvana*.

KARMA

Closely allied to the aims of Hinduism is the principle of reincarnation or rebirth. The belief is that although the material body may die, the spirit or soul of that object lives on since that soul is a part of God. Since the object of Hinduism is God realization,

the soul is re-born a number of times. While trapped in a material existence, the soul has to strive to break free by improving its *dharma*. This does not mean that at each re-birth the soul is brought closer to God. The position it occupies on the scale towards achieving God realization is dependent upon that soul's *karma*.

Karma is a principle whereby the deeds of one's life determine one's position at rebirth. One's state of Godliness would determine how one progresses towards achieving reunion with God. *Karma* then, determines whether one progresses towards achieving *moksha*, or retrogresses. A commonly held belief amongst Hindus is that if an individual shows animalistic passions and behaviour, that individual would be re-born an animal. On the other hand the individual who lived a pure, Godly existence and who abided by the principles of *dharma*, would, on re-birth, be brought closer to God. *Karma* is then, the reward or retribution one obtains at a future birth, based on one's deeds in a previous life.

ARTHA AND KAMA

Although Hinduism appears to be pre-occupied with spiritual growth, it does not deny the material world. The principles of *Artha* and *Kama* celebrate the material existence.

Arta refers to material wealth. 'The individual may satisfy his urge to accumulate wealth but he has to do so within the bounds of *dharma*. It is believed that spiritual development cannot take place in poverty, since the immediate concerns of the poor are not about spiritual upliftment but the satisfaction of their material needs. But, accumulating wealth at the expense of others is a negative factor which would affect one's *karma* accordingly. If *artha* is used for the benefit of one's community or in any way which would lead to personal growth, one's *karma* would be affected positively.

Kama, which refers to desire, is not restricted to the lowly sensual pleasures such as lust or greed. Restriction of *Kama* to sensual pleasures only, stifles one's *dharma* and the individual is reduced to a bestial level. *Kama* which eventually leads to spiritual upliftment has a positive effect on one's *dharma*. Iyer supplies the following list of factors which positively affect one's *dharma*:

To enjoy the sun-shine or a landscape, to listen to music, to read a play is both sensuous and spiritual. The joys of married life are extolled. The happiness that is derived from the performance of duty and from leading a pure and noble life is commended.¹⁷

VARNA-DHARMA

In the pursuit of spiritual growth, Hinduism recognises four different classes of man which occupy any given society. This stratification of society is called *Varna-dharma* and is a necessary adjunct to the principles of *Karma*. The roots of *Varna-dharma* is to be found in the *Vedas*. When Purusha was immolated in the cosmic sacrifice at the creation of the universe, the four classes of men were also born:

His mouth became the *brahmin*; his arms became the warrior prince, his legs the common man who plies his trade. The lowly serf was born from his feet.¹⁸

The *Brahmin* class were intellectuals well versed in the teachings of the Hindu scriptures. It was the duty of this class, who acted as priests, to become the spiritual custodians of society. 'The warrior prince' or *Kshatriya* class was supposed to personify courage and justice. This class was given the duty of protecting society and therefore came to be its rulers. The *Vaishya* "plies his trade" and provides society with its essential services. The *Vaishya* class is a commercial grouping and may include farmers, traders and other professionals. The *Sudra* is 'the lowly serf' who supplies the labour which is necessary in any society.

Although this division of man into class groups, is the forerunner of the much loathed caste-system, it must be remembered that these four classes of man are necessary for the smooth functioning of any society. The caste system is a corruption of the original system as presented in the *Vedas*. The *Vedic* belief is that one's character would determine the class one occupies in a given society. The caste system on the other hand imprisons an individual at birth.

ASRAMA-DHARMA

Another important facet of Hinduism, linked to the spiritual growth of an individual, is *Asrama-dharma*. This is the division of a single life-time into four *asramas* or stages: *Brahmacharya*, *Garhastya*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sannyasa*.

Brahmacharya is the student stage of one's existence when one is expected to study the *Vedas*, come to terms with the requirements of *dharma* and generally prepare oneself for a trade or profession. This stage prepares the individual to become a *Garhastya* or householder. During this stage the individual marries, raises children and is expected to perform his duties to society. When these social obligations have been fulfilled and one's children have attained adulthood,

one becomes a *Vanaprastha* or forest-dweller. During this stage the individual withdraws from society, begins meditating upon the nature of God and his own *dharma* while, at the same time, he is intent upon detaching himself from his material existence. This stage lasts until one is able to assume an attitude of total detachment, at which point one becomes a *Sannyasa*. During this stage the individual's only concern is the attainment of *moksha* or liberation from the material world. It will be noticed that the *asrama* have been designed in a manner which allows the individual the opportunity to journey through life while at the same time progressively fulfilling life's aims.

CONCLUSION

Hinduism is a way of life based on the belief that the manifested world originates from within God and at some point the manifested world dissolves and returns to God. To enjoy eternal bliss within the spirit of God, the individual has to become spiritually awakened. This awakening is achieved by the acceptance of certain basic principles and ethics. Among these ethics are purity, non-violence, truth and detachment.

CHAPTER ONE NOTES

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CHAPTER TWO

SYMBOLISM AND IMAGERY IN HINDU MYTHOLOGY

Cotterell's contention that "India thinks in images"¹ is amply evident in the rich tapestry of mythology woven around the religious practices of Hindus. An important and striking feature of Hinduism is the preponderance of gods and demi-gods around whom a vast canon of mythology is associated. It is not the gods or the myths which are important but the fact that they serve the need for bringing about a more intimate knowledge and understanding of the religious concepts and doctrines. Another aspect connected to the need for mythology is the concept of *Karma* (see Chapter One). According to this doctrine the soul of man is reborn several times until it reaches a level of existence and perfection which leads eventually to *nirvana* or a final liberation and reunion with God. It therefore follows that at any given time, not all humans would have achieved an intellectual capability necessary for meditation upon the lofty, abstract philosophy so strongly connected to the religion and the nature of God. To enable those incapable of meditating upon the Truth in abstract terms, as espoused by the religion, it becomes necessary for this function be served by some other means - hence the vast tracts of mythology so popular amongst Hindus.

Hindu mythology does not exist just as a vast canon of static literature, but is brought to life by the visual arts in the form of sculptures and paintings. These sculptures and paintings, which are the predominant feature of Hindu temples and other places of worship, are much more than mere artistic flights of fancy. Each image is so precisely calculated that it embodies both the mythology and the abstract doctrines of the religion. The images invite a variety of interpretations which in turn stimulate the intellect of the devotee as he attempts to come to terms with the image and the doctrines which they expound. These myths and images finally form the basis upon which the performance of many Hindu rituals rely. In this chapter the various images of the gods and the myths associated with them will be described and the inherent symbolism analyzed. Only images of gods which have a direct bearing upon the rituals to be discussed in this theses, are considered. The analyses and conclusions are based largely on the interpretations offered by various temple priests and devotees to whom I have spoken in the course of this study.

BRAHMA

Brahma, who represents the creative force of the Ultimate Reality or *Brahman*, has his origins in the

Hiranyagarbha hymn of the *Rig Vedas* where he appears as Hiranyagarbha, the Golden Embryo or Germ and Prajapati, Lord of the Creatures. The hymn begins with a description of the birth of the Hiranyagarbha:

In the beginning arose the Golden
Germ: he was, as soon as born, the
Lord of Being, sustainer of this
Earth and this Heaven.²

The Hiranyagarbha is finally proclaimed to be Prajapati, the lord of creatures, at the conclusion of the hymn:

O Lord of creatures, Father of all
beings, you alone pervade all that
has come to birth.³

The *Puranic* myth concerning Brahma's role as the creator (described in the previous chapter) is an extension of this Vedic conception of creation. In both instances the creative energy (Hiranyagarbha or Prajapati of the *VEDAS* and Brahma of the *PURANAS*), whose function it is to carry out the role of cosmic creator, has its origins in a higher authority or Supreme Being. This reinforces the following Hindu beliefs:

1. the various gods are different aspects of the one Supreme God or Ultimate Reality.

Figure 1 : THE HINDU TRIAD



A



B



2. there is no absolute beginning nor end to creation
- Brahma is created by Brahman, the Ultimate Reality, at the beginning of each life-cycle to re-create the universe.

The worship of Brahma was popular during the latter part of the *Vedic Age* (which Sarma dates from 2000 B.C. to 560 B.C.⁴) when, as Prajapati, he occupied the supreme position amongst the deities. His popularity has since declined. One reason put forward for this decline is that once creation has been achieved, the role of creator is no longer important and interest passes on to those aspects of God which are encapsulated in the guises of Sustainer or Protector, and Destroyer. Shrines or temples dedicated solely to Brahma are rare and festivals or rituals dedicated to Brahma's worship are likewise rare, although his name might be invoked in rituals dedicated to some other deity. His image, too, might be found in temples, but in non-important positions.

Images of Brahma usually depict him as having four heads and four arms (figure 1A). Myths state that Brahma originally had five heads. One of these myths is described in the previous chapter. Another myth holds that Brahma, after being created, divides his body in two to create a woman called Satrupa. When Brahma sees Satrupa, he is captivated by her beauty and falls in

love with her. Satrupa, embarrassed by Brahma's gaze, coyly moves out of his line of vision. Brahma sprouts a second head to face the direction in which she stands. Satrupa moves out of the glance of this head too, but Brahma creates more heads so that he has four - each facing a particular direction. Satrupa, in desperation, finally ascends skywards, but the wily Brahma sprouts a fifth head facing skywards.⁵ This magnetic attraction which Brahma feels for Satrupa reinforces the fervour which makes the creation possible. Brahma's fifth head is soon consumed and destroyed by the fire of Shiva's third eye. Reasons for Shiva's action vary. In one myth Shiva's action was provoked by Brahma's claims to being superior to Shiva. This act therefore affirms Shiva's superiority. Another version states that Shiva punishes Brahma for committing incest with his daughter. Satrupa, owing to the circumstances of her birth, is also considered to be Brahma's daughter.⁶

In his four hands Brahma may carry a lotus flower, his sceptre, a spoon or ladle, a string of prayer beads, and a bowl or a manuscript. According to Margaret Stutley, the lotus is symbolic "of the sun, of purity, of perfection, and of the material aspect of creation. The petals represent creation in its consecutive forms; the open lotus flower denotes the manifested universe."⁷ For many Hindus, the lotus is also a symbol of the Ultimate Reality and acts as an indication of

the link that exists between the individual soul and God.

The sceptre, a symbol of royalty and power, is much more than a reminder of the position Brahma once held in the Hindu pantheon; it is an indication of the importance of creation in achieving the goal of Hinduism - *moksha*. This only becomes possible when the individual soul passes through several existences, and with each existence, working itself towards perfection.

The spoon, prayer beads and bowl are symbols of the *sannyasin* - the individual who has achieved the fourth stage of life according to the doctrines of *Asrama-dharma*. The spoon or ladle is a utensil used in the sacrifice, the string of beads acts as an aid for meditation upon God, while the bowl is used by the *sannyasin* to obtain food from obliging householders. These symbols emphasise the belief that the physical or material aspects of life are unimportant since it is one's spiritual growth which determines one's attainment of *moksha* and true knowledge. The manner in which this knowledge might be obtained is contained in the *Vedas*, symbolised by the manuscript which Brahma holds. The *Vedas*, say the creation myths, are presented to mankind at the beginning of each cycle of creation.

Finally, Brahma's vehicle or *vahana* is a swan (*hansa*) which symbolises knowledge. As the god responsible for the creation, Brahma is knowledge incarnated; hence, he is sometimes presented as a wise, white-bearded old man.

VISHNU

Vishnu was a minor *Vedic* deity whom the *Rig Veda* honours for the three steps which he takes to traverse the heavens and the earth.

I will now proclaim the manly powers of Vishnu
Who measured out earth's broad expanses,
Propped up the highest place of meeting;
Three steps he paced, the widely striding!.⁸

The 'three steps' that he takes not only emphasise his power but also contribute towards bringing the heavens within the reach of the creatures that dwell upon the earth. At the same time these steps act as a force which sustains both the heavenly regions and the earth:

The marks of his three steps are filled with
honey;
Unfailing they rejoice each in its own way.
Though one, in three-fold wise he has propped up
Heaven and earth, all beings [and all worlds].⁹

Vishnu's popularity gained momentum and in the *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata*, his significance as sustainer and

preserver is magnified: he is proclaimed as the supreme lord on a par with or even superior to Shiva and Brahma - the other two deities who form the triad with Vishnu.

Vishnu is usually represented as reclining or standing on the coils of the serpent king, Shesha (sometimes called Naga or Ananta, which means 'without end'), afloat on the cosmic ocean. He is dressed in royal robes with ornate bracelets, necklaces and a crown (figure 1B). The many heads of Shesha form a protective hood above Vishnu. The image of a sleeping Vishnu represents the period between creations, when all that has been created and will be created again are absorbed into Vishnu's being. It is for this reason that a lotus flower may be seen emanating from the region of his navel. This alludes to the myth in which Brahma is born and given the responsibility of creator. Vishnu's consort, Lakshmi, is normally seated at his side while his vehicle, Garuda (a giant bird depicted in human form, with wings) kneels in front of them.

Vishnu has four hands in which he carries a conch shell, a mace, a discus and a lotus flower. If the lotus flower is absent, Vishnu's lower right hand may then assume a gesture of protection. The sound of the conch is popular in Hindu rituals for two reasons. Firstly its sound, similar to the sacred syllable *OM*, is a constant reminder of the cosmic vibrations which

maintain the harmony of the universe and life. Secondly, the sound acts as a summons to devotees to pay homage to God. According to Swami Chinmayananda, the conch is used as a means of "calling man to live the nobler values of life so that he may turn away from all his worldly preoccupations and ultimately reach God and receive from Him the Infinite Bliss of unbroken peace and perfection."¹⁰

The discus, with its many spokes, has led to the belief that it represents the sun. The sun is normally associated with the two basic, but contrasting, functions of fertility and rejuvenation on one end, and death and destruction at the other. The discus then becomes, like the sun, an instrument for meting out rewards or punishment. Wrong doers and people immersed in the pursuit of sensual and material pleasures may feel the annihilating power of the discus, so that they may start afresh on their path towards God-realization. The discus may also become an instrument for the removal of obstacles in the path of the devotee who strives for the attainment of *nirvana*. There are many myths which relate the manner in which Vishnu removes impediments, in the form of demonic and evil forces, which from time to time threaten God's creations. (These will be described later, when Vishnu's role as sustainer and protector is dealt with.)

Like the discus, the mace is also a symbol of justice and the lotus flower symbolises the unfolding of creation and the ultimate destiny of man.

While Vishnu's omnipotence is symbolically presented by the instruments or weapons he carries, his omnipresence is stated in two ways. Firstly, his name is derived from the root, *Vish*, which means 'to pervade'. Secondly, he is always depicted as blue in colour.¹¹ This is a direct reference to the vast expanse of the immeasurable sky. This all pervading, immensurable quality is essential if Vishnu is to successfully carry out his functions of sustainer and protector of the universe. Hindus usually perceive Vishnu as an all pervading force seated in his heaven, *Vaikuntha*, keeping a watchful eye over his creation; and whenever the need arises, he descends from heaven in an earthly form to save the world from ruin and annihilation. These descents or incarnations are called *avatars*. Although in mythology, the need for Vishnu's descent usually occurs when humanity is caught in a bitter struggle against demons, the metaphorical allusion of this is clear: the continual struggle between good and evil necessitates intervention, so that man may be prevented from transgressing the path of *dharma*. In the *Bhagavadgita*, Krishna, one of the many *avatars* of Vishnu states:

Whenever there is a decline of righteousness and rise of unrighteousness, O Bharata (Arjuna), then I send forth (create, incarnate) Myself.¹²

He further adds:

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being from age to age.¹³

Although there appears to be some disagreement about the exact number of avatars (some Hindu texts list twenty-two and others state that they are innumerable), it is generally accepted that there are ten in the present cycle of creation.¹⁴ The seventh and eighth incarnations, Rama and Krishna, are most popular in worship. The first incarnation occurs at the beginning of creation when it becomes necessary for Vishnu to assume the form of a fish to either save Manu, the father of mankind, from the deluge, or to retrieve the *Vedas* (stolen from Brahma by a demon) from the bottom of the ocean.¹⁵ Vishnu transforms himself into Kurma, the tortoise, for his second incarnation. In this form he helps with the churning of the ocean of milk, so that *amritha* or ambrosia (the cream of the ocean) might be salvaged to ensure the continuation of creation.¹⁶ In another myth Vishnu assumes this form so that the unsteady earth could be stabilised on the hard shell of the tortoise.¹⁷ As Varaha, the third *avatar*, Vishnu assumes the form of a boar. Two myths, both

relating to the creation of the earth, account for Vishnu's assumption of this form. In the first, Brahma and Vishnu appear as one personage and taking on the guise of a water-loving boar, this *avatar* tackles the task of fashioning the world out of the cosmic ocean. A lotus leaf, floating on the waters, is observed by the boar. Believing that the stem of the leaf must be fixed on to something, the boar swims to the bottom of the ocean, where he finds the earth. The second myth describes the boar's rescue of the earth from demons who had stolen the earth and taken it to the bottom of the ocean.¹⁸ Narsingh or Narsinha, the fourth *avatar* of Vishnu, is half-man and half-lion. In this form Vishnu saves the world from the demon Hiranyakasipu, who has been granted a boon by Brahma.¹⁹ The implications of this boon are that Hiranyakasipu could not be killed by man, beast or god, inside or outside his palace, by day or by night. As Narsingh, Vishnu accomplishes the feat of killing this demon in the doorway of Hiranyakasipu's palace at twilight. In this manner he accomplishes the task of maintaining order on earth without breaching the boon granted by Brahma.

Bali, a great conquering king and well loved by his people, has one flaw which threatens the harmony of life on earth - his ambition to usurp the kingdom of the gods. Having become conqueror and ruler of the earth, Bali soon achieves his goal when he presides as

ruler over the three worlds: heaven, earth and the underworld. At the behest of the gods, Vishnu assumes the form of his fifth avatar, Vamana, the dwarf, so that he might regain control of the three worlds and restore order.²⁰ In this form, Vishnu visits Bali, who is engaged in a religious sacrifice, to grant him a piece of land to be measured by three of Vamana's paces. Bali, the ever perfect host, readily agrees to this. The dwarf, at this point, transforms himself into a giant of cosmic proportions and begins staking out his claim. The first two paces cover the heavens and earth, which are restored to their rightful owners. Vishnu, as Vamana, does not claim the final and third pace, which would have meant the acquisition of the underworld. The vanquished Bali is allowed dominion over this region.

For his sixth incarnation, Vishnu is more warrior-like. As Parasuram (a name derived from the *Parasa*, an axe, given to him by Shiva), it is Vishnu's task to defeat the *Kshatriya* Kings who were becoming corrupt and usurping the power of the *brahmins*. Parasuram achieves his goal (with the aid of the axe) in twenty-one excursions against the *Kshatriya* clan. So bloody are these battles that five large lakes were filled with the blood of the *Kshatriyas*.²¹

Vishnu's seventh incarnation is Ramachandra (Rama), whose exploits are detailed in the much revered epic the *Ramayana*, written by the sage Valmiki. Vishnu's purpose in this descent was to overcome the most powerful and dangerous demon yet to threaten the earth and mankind, Ravana, who had obtained his powers through severe austerities devoted to Brahma.²²

Vishnu appears to the heirless king, Dasaratha, and offers him a nectar which his wives are to drink. The nectar is divided amongst the three wives of Dasaratha; half to Kausalya and a quarter each to Kaikeyi and Sumitra. The wives soon give birth to sons and prospective heirs to Dasaratha's throne. Kausalya's son, Rama, possesses half of the divine essence of Vishnu; Kaikeyi's son, Bharata, possesses a quarter, while Lakshmana and Satrughna, the two sons born to Sumitra, possess an eighth each of Vishnu's divinity.

Kausalya is the principal wife of Dasaratha and her son Rama, who is the eldest of the four, is next in line to the throne. When Dasaratha decides to abdicate in favour of his eldest son, Kaikeyi, whose resentment is spurred on by a malicious hand-maiden, cunningly traps Dasaratha to proclaim Bharata (Kaikeyi's son) King. Kaikeyi asks Dasaratha to grant her a boon. This the old king does without knowing what the boon is. When Kaikeyi reveals her desire, Dasaratha is appalled and

is even more shocked when he learns that not only should Bharata inherit the throne but that Rama should be sent into exile for fourteen years. Being honour bound, Dasaratha is unable to retract his promise. Bharata, too, is distressed at his mother's request and tries to restore the throne to its rightful ruler by persuading Rama to return from exile. But Rama, in an effort to uphold his father's honour, entreats Bharata to rule the kingdom as a regent, until Rama's return after fourteen years. Bharata agrees to this request, but he places a pair of Rama's sandals on the throne as a constant reminder that the rightful ruler is absent but that he will soon return.

Rama is accompanied into exile, by his brother, Lakshmana, and although he tries to dissuade her, his wife, Sita, also accompanies him. Rama had earlier won Sita's hand in marriage when he successfully accomplished the task of breaking a bow belonging to Shiva.

It is while in exile that Rama's battle with Ravana begins. The prelude to this battle occurs when Rama spurns the advances of Surpanakha, Ravana's sister. Surpanakha seeks revenge by provoking in Ravana, a passionate urge to possess Rama's wife, Sita. Ravana succumbs to his passion by abducting Sita and carrying her off to his kingdom.

After securing the help of the monkey king, Sugriva, who raises an army of monkeys under the generalship of Hanuman, son of Vayu the wind god, Rama succeeds in defeating Ravana and being reunited with Sita. Rama however, has doubts about Sita's chastity, and to prove her innocence, Sita throws herself into a flaming pyre. Her purity is proven when she comes through this ordeal unaffected. Finally, in triumph, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana re-enter Ayodhya after their banishment and are greeted with great festivities and celebrations by the citizens.

The characters of Rama and Sita are revered by Hindus the world over, not so much for Rama's overcoming of Ravana but rather for being the personification of ideal Hindu manhood and womanhood. Sita, who follows her husband even in the face of danger; who remains chaste under the direst circumstances, and who willingly allows her loyalty to her husband to be tested, has become a role-model for Hindu women. Parthasarathy sums up the character of Rama when he states:

The great sage, Valmiki, has, in his creation of this divine hero, symbolised in Him the ideal of uncompromising goodness. Nowhere else does one find such idealistic perfections in all walks of life, combined in a single individual. Thus Rama was at once a perfect son, an

ideal king, a true husband, a real friend, a devoted brother, a noble enemy....²³

Vishnu's chief aim in assuming the form of his eighth avatar, Krishna, was to defeat Kansa, a demon who tyrannically rules over the kingdom of Mathura. As one of the most popular deities of modern Hinduism, Krishna is not revered for this feat, but for a host of other feats that have come to be associated with him through popular mythology. Although, Krishna, from the time of his birth, is constantly at battle with demons who attempt to kill him, it is his very human qualities, his childish pranks and youthful exuberance, which have endeared him to his devotees.

To accomplish this descent, Vishnu plucks two hairs, one white and the other black, from his body which he uses to impregnate Devaki and Rohini. The black hair is born as Krishna to Devaki, while the white hair, as Balram, is born to Rohini. The demon ruler of Mathura had earlier learnt that a child of Devaki would kill him. To thwart this threat to his life, Kansa kills all the children born to Devaki. Krishna is saved from a similar fate when his mother exchanges the new born Krishna for the daughter of a herdsman, Nanda. Krishna's youth is spent with Nanda and his wife Yasoda in the romantic idyll of rural tranquility.²⁴

While overcoming various demons who attempt to kill him, like Putana who attempts to suckle the baby Krishna with poison from her breast, Krishna retains his humanness by involving himself in childish pranks and mischief. Krishna might suck the life out of Putana but he also amuses himself by stealing curd and butter or toppling pails of milk and placing the blame on other children. Krishna, during this period, also reveals his super human qualities in a number of ways - he kicks over a fully-laden cart, uproots trees, and in one instance, Yasoda (Krishna's foster mother) is amazed to see the whole universe in his throat.²⁵

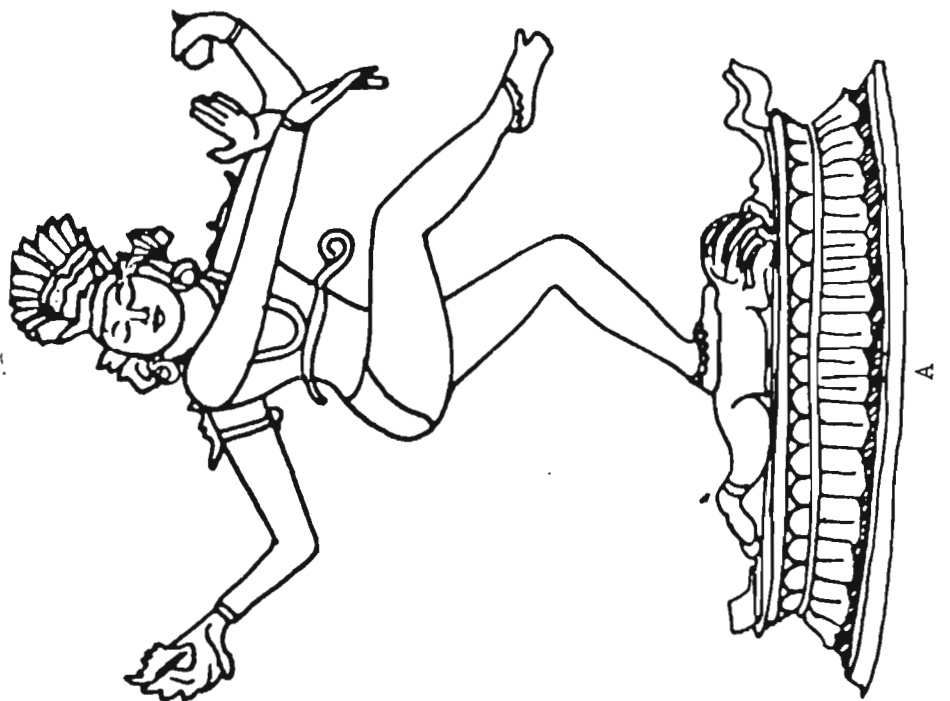
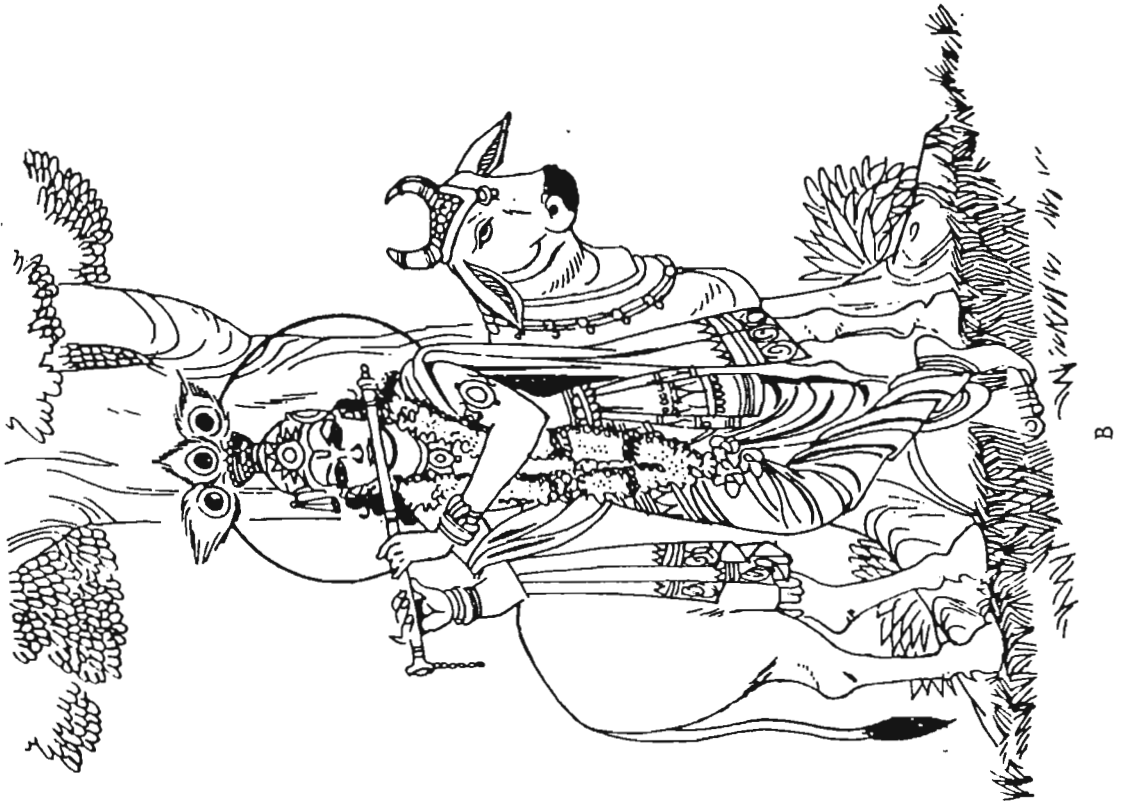
Krishna endears himself to this rural community of herdsman, not only by saving them from forces of evil, but by the very nature of his being. In one of the more famous episodes from his youth, Krishna playfully hides the clothes of a group of gopis or cowgirls when he comes across them bathing in a river. After teasing them Krishna finally placates the love-sick girls by promising to dance with them on a moonlit night. On the promised night Krishna plays his flute to summon the girls. When the dance begins, each girl believes that she alone is dancing with Krishna.²⁶ The dance is thought to have lasted for six months and when the ecstatic girls finally return home they find that no-one is aware of their absence. Although this myth has many overtly sexual connotations, its spiritual

significance cannot be ignored. The love-sick girls' experiencing such complete fulfilment, is the purest form of devotion to God. This devotion finally leads to eternal bliss when the individual soul is reunited with God. The dance becomes symbolic of God's acceptance of the soul of man. This episode brings the rural interlude of Krishna's life to an end.

Kansa, who finally learns the true identity of his would-be killer, lures Krishna back to Mathura. Numerous demons and tricks are used to overcome Krishna but he proves too powerful for these attempts and finally succeeds in slaying Kansa.²⁷ With this deed Krishna achieves his goal, but his career on earth is far from over. His philosophic teachings during the latter stages of his life have strengthened his reputation and earned him a massive following with numerous cults devoted totally to his worship; the most famous of these cults being the Hare Krishna Movement.

Krishna's philosophic advice is contained in the *Bhagavad Gita* section of the *Mahabharata*. This epic, a virtual treasury of myths and legends of India, traces the history and outcome of the feud between the Pandava brothers and their cousins, the Kauravas. The culmination of this feud is a battle of titanic proportions. Krishna, who is related to both families, is asked for assistance by both feuding factions.

Figure 2 : NATARAJA AND KRISHNA



Wishing not to take sides, Krishna asks both sides to choose either his army or himself. The Pandavas choose the services of Krishna while the Kauravas opt for his army. Krishna does not take an active role in the battle, but he offers advice which boosts the morale of the Pandavas. The *Bhagavad Gita* occurs at a point in the battle when Arjuna, the Pandava to whom Krishna is charioteer, experiences intense doubts about the morality of killing his relatives. The *Bhagavad Gita*, or "Song of the Lord" written in dialogue form, contains Krishna's advice to Arjuna on the battlefield. This advice contains the very essence of Hinduism and is revered by Hindus as Holy Scriptures. Its popularity and importance has to some extent superceded that of the *Vedas*.

After the battle, which has left both sides, including the victorious Pandavas, devastated, Krishna goes into the forest to meditate. As he sits barefooted, he is mistaken for a deer by a huntsman whose arrow pierces his only vulnerable spot - his left heel. Krishna then ascends heavenward in a halo of radiant light.²⁸

Illustrations of Krishna usually depict highlights of his career on earth. These include the baby Krishna eating butter, the youthful Krishna dancing with the *gopis* and the mature Krishna advising Arjuna on the battlefield. The most popular illustration is one in

which Krishna is playing a flute while standing next to a cow which appears to be paying obeisance to him (figure 2B). The flute, which was used to summon the *gopis*, symbolises the eternal call of God to follow the path of *dharma* or righteousness. The cow, a submissive and passive animal, represents the unquestioning obedience and devotion of a true follower of *dharma*.

There appears to be some disagreement about the identity of Vishnu's ninth avatar. Both Balram, Krishna's brother, and the Buddha are contenders for this title. It is universally accepted, however, that Kalki, Vishnu's tenth avatar, is yet to appear. The belief is that this avatar will take the form of a giant with a horse's head. After destroying evil, his duty is to bring the present life cycle to a close by absorbing everything into his being.²⁹

Vishnu, as sustainer and protector, is a constant reminder to Hindus that good finally triumphs over evil. His fights with demons demonstrate this. Although in many instances the tales appear to be far-fetched, they represent the Hindu manner of emphasising beliefs. The super-human and super-evil at constant battle with each other demonstrates the nature of evil and the ease with which one can be trapped, while the super-human qualities of the gods serve as a yardstick for the ordinary mortal to measure the strength and devotion it

would require to overcome evil. The incarnations are a means of assuring the devotee "that He is present everywhere in all forms and names to protect the virtuous and uphold Dharma according to the requirements of time, conditions and emergency."³⁰

SHIVA

Shiva represents the third aspect of life in the triad. If life is to be created, then sustained and protected, it becomes necessary that such life reach a further plane or even achieve a goal. For Hindus this goal is achieved when man breaks free from the shackles of the material world and achieves a oneness with God or the Ultimate Reality. For this reason the material aspects of life need to be destroyed so that the soul can be released. But before this can happen the individual must first destroy his baser instincts which include greed, lust and egotism. It is this aspect of life that Shiva represents - the destroyer of evil and finally the destroyer of the universe or the catalyst who is responsible for the dissolution of the manifested universe. At this point the followers of Shiva, for whom Shiva is supreme amongst the triad, assert that Shiva absorbs the universe within himself where it waits to be re-created by Brahma in the continuous cycle of birth and death.

Because of his role as destroyer, Shiva is often associated with death and calamities which threaten to destroy man. At the same time he appears to be a benevolent being who strives to improve the lot of man. For the non-Hindu this might appear to be a contradiction, but for the Hindu Shiva's function as destroyer is a manifestation of his role as saviour of mankind. It is the destroyer who finally leads man to his ultimate destiny - reunion with God.

Shiva is a pre-Aryan deity whose symbols, such as the *lingam*, have been unearthed at the ruins of the ancient Indus valley civilizations of Harrapa and Mahenjodaro.³¹ The character of Shiva came to be fused with that of Rudra, the Aryan deity, who, according to the *Vedas*, was the red god of lightning and storms. As god of the storms, Shiva's *Vedic* forerunner instilled fear in his followers since he had the ability to destroy and create havoc on an awesome scale. Rudra's power is proclaimed in the following verse of the *Rig Veda*:

Most glorious in glory, in strength most strong
 Of all that's born, O Rudra, wielder of the art thou
 bolt.³²

Although he is feared, Rudra is also looked upon as a benevolent healer as the following two verses illustrate:

Ferry us in safety to the shore beyond distress;
Fend off [from us] all assaults of injury [and
disease]

Raise up our men with healing remedies,
Best of physicians - so do I hear of thee.³³

Shiva, like his predecessor Rudra, is also considered as being both kind and benevolent, and, at the same time, the harbinger of chaos and destruction. In many of the myths the destructive element of Shiva appears to be arbitrary and petulant. In other words if he is suitably provoked or angered, he would give vent to this anger by creating some calamity which could end in disaster or destruction. In one myth Kama, the god of love and desire is sent to Mount Kailasa, Shiva's abode, to arouse Shiva out of his deep meditation. When Shiva feels Kama's shaft, he is irritated and angered. He opens his third eye and looks at Kama, who is at once destroyed by the fire that issues from the eye.³⁴ This deed of Shiva's is much more than an impetuous act of an individual who is easily offended. Against the larger canvass of Hindu philosophy the destruction of Kama is the act of a dedicated ascetic who strives to eradicate distractions (in this case, desire) which might affect the perfect contemplation on the Ultimate Reality. In his role as destroyer, Shiva is also the remover of obstacles which lie in the path of God realization.

There are three images of Shiva which are popularly used to symbolise this deity:

- an ascetic meditating on Mount Kailasa (figure 1C)
- Shiva-Nataraja (figure 2A)
- Shiva-Lingam

As the ascetic, Shiva is usually depicted seated on a tiger skin in the position of a *yogi* while being deep in meditation. If he is standing, the tiger skin serves as a loin cloth. Except for his blue throat, his skin is white; the result of being smeared with sacred ashes. He has long matted hair, a part of which is tied up in a type of high chignon. This hairstyle is typical of an ascetic or *sannyasin*. At the apex of the chignon, the head of mother *Ganga*, from whose mouth a fountain-like spray of water flows, may be seen. The side of his hair is ornamented with a crescent shaped moon, a symbol of regeneration and fertility. Wrapped around his neck and arms are cobras and prayer beads. He holds a trident in one hand while the other is held in the gesture of protection. In his other two hands he carries a rosary, a water/begging bowl or weapons such as a sword, a bow or a club. One of the more conspicuous features of Shiva is his third eye which appears vertically on his forehead. Because of his third eye, he is also known as *Triambaka*.

The myth concerning Shiva's acquisition of his third eye is narrated in the *Mahabharata*. In this account Shiva's consort, Parvati, playfully approaches him from behind while he is meditating on Mount Kailasa. As soon as she covers his eyes with her hands, the world is plunged into darkness and is threatened with destruction as all life freezes. A massive tongue of fire then flares out from Shiva's forehead and a third eye appears. Soon everything, including the Himalaya, Parvati's father, is burned to ashes. Parvati's pleas make Shiva relent and normality is restored.³⁵ In this simple tale, a few important principles of Hindu thought are expounded. Firstly, life being threatened with destruction when Shiva's eyes are closed, is a reaffirmation of the following Hindu beliefs:

- 1) God is the energy behind the dynamism of creation;
- 2) God sustains life, and
- 3) God has the ability to periodically destroy his creation.

Secondly, the concept of the third eye symbolises the ability to see beyond the material plane and so overcome the limitations of manifested reality. It is with this dimension of vision that the individual soul is able to break free from the bondage of the material body and aspire to become one with the Ultimate Reality - God. This ability of the third eye to metaphorically burn and reduce to ashes whatever it sees, maintains

the Hindu view that the true *sannyasin*, after austere meditation, is able to overcome any obstacle which might prevent him from obtaining oneness with God. Thirdly, not only is Shiva's destruction and restoration a confirmation of the Hindu belief that God is benevolent but it also restates the Hindu concept of death and regeneration. It is with this principle of regeneration that Shiva is normally associated - inherited from his predecessors, the Indus fertility god and the *Vedic Rudra*.

Shiva's role as benevolent protector is also illustrated in myths which account for his acquisition of a blue throat and mother Ganga at the top of his head. The gods are engaged in a battle against the demons and in order to strengthen themselves, the gods have to obtain *amritha* (ambrosia) by churning the ocean of milk. The serpent Shesha is used as a churning rope and soon begins to vomit poison which threatens to fall into the ocean of milk, ruining the ambrosia and destroying the gods. Shiva saves the day by catching the poison in his throat. Parvati prevents him from swallowing it by applying a tourniquet to his throat with her hands. The poison, which is arrested, turns his throat blue.³⁶

Shiva again acts as protector and saviour of the world when he catches the heavenly river Ganga in his hair,

breaking its torrential flow which could have had a disastrous effect on earth. The earth was threatened with barrenness when the ashes of the dead began to clutter it. The sage Bhagiratha, who had extraordinary powers, believed that by bringing the river Ganges down to earth, the ashes would be washed away and the fertility of the earth restored. Being a celestial river, the river's flow could not be contained by the earth. But catastrophe is averted when Shiva steps in and breaks the flow of the Ganges by catching its waters in the locks of his hair and then allowing it to flow down to earth.³⁷ The greater implications of this myth is analysed by Herbert who states:

...there is an esoteric and close correspondence between the purifying Ganges, which circulates in the universe like the blood in our bodies, and Siva who, like the heart, motionless in its rhythm, provokes and directs this life-giving and purifying circulation in the universe and in the human being.³⁸

The manner in which Shiva obtains the tiger-skin, trident and cobras is explained as the result of a plot by the *rishis* of Darukavana to destroy Shiva. The *rishis* come to believe that prayer to Shiva is useless and that the same benefits could be derived by just performing sacrifices. Shiva is concerned about this and with Vishnu, he devises a plan to correct the waywardness of the *rishis*.

Vishnu assuming the form of the enchantress Mohini, enters the abode of the *rishis* at Darukavana and beguiles the *rishis*. The *rishis* soon become passionately excited and lose possession of their ability to think and act rationally. Shiva also enters Darukavana. His guise is that of a mendicant. Shiva sets about seducing the *rishis'* wives by singing the *srutis* and other hymns. The wives begin to follow Shiva and entreat him to satisfy them. The *rishis*, bearing witness to this, regain their senses and become intensely jealous. They decide to avenge themselves by killing Shiva. A tiger is sent after Shiva to kill him. Shiva not only kills the tiger, he skins it with a fingernail and uses the skin as a garment. A trident is created to murder Shiva, but this he turns into a weapon for his own use. Black cobras and a deer with sharp horns are also sent in pursuit of Shiva. The all powerful Shiva easily subdues these as well and uses them for his personal ornamentation.³⁹

This fantastical tale very graphically illustrates the Hindu view that all things, both animate and inanimate, are creations of God and as such, are a part of God. The *rishis'* desire to forsake God and later to kill Him, demonstrate the view that man is totally impotent against the power of God. The only way to achieving a degree of power and fulfilment is by celebrating the glory of God, thereby gaining God-realization. This

becomes clear at the denouement of the myth.

The rishis, in a final attempt to destroy Shiva, send a black demonic dwarf, who is armed with a club, to kill Shiva. But Shiva quite easily subdues the dwarf by stepping on him. At this point Shiva begins to dance. The rishis watch the dance in awe and in silence, becoming totally mesmerized by the hypnotic rhythm of the dance. All the gods descend from heaven to meditate upon this wondrous dance. The *rishis* finally acknowledge Shiva as their lord and submit themselves to him by prostrating at the dancer's feet.⁴⁰

This myth provides the background for one of the more popular images of Shiva - Nataraja, the king of the Dance. In this form Shiva is frozen in mid-dance in a pose of perfect harmony. *Nataraja* is framed by a ring of flickering flames which represent the forces of creation. He has four hands and uses his upper right arm to hold aloft an hour-glass shaped drum called the *damaru*. Sound is deemed to be a necessary element which maintains and governs rhythm and movement. Hence the harmony of the universe is dependent upon sound. The shape of the drum serves as a reminder that the existence of the universe or manifested reality is restricted by time. The individual has, therefore, a limited timespan to ensure that his soul is worthy to achieve oneness with God. The imminent destruction of

the universe is further emphasised by the tongue of flame which Nataraja holds in his upper left hand. The protection and blessing that Nataraja offers is symbolised in the gesture of his lower right hand. The lower left hand is held across his upper body as he points downwards. Shiva here, appears to be saying that with his protection and blessing an individual may attain salvation and God-realization by following the example of his feet. One of his feet is resting on the demonic dwarf while the other is raised. The demon is a symbol of the baser elements of man's nature, which are obstacles that lie in the path to God-realization. By stepping on the dwarf, Nataraja exhorts humanity to overcome and rid itself of these passions. The uplifted left foot serves as a reassurance to mankind, that one has the ability to free oneself of the material body and attain peace and eternal bliss.

For many Hindus, the cosmic dance of Nataraja contains, in symbolic form, the principles of *Dharma* and it is for this reason that the image is popular in Hindu homes and temples. As the deity responsible for maintaining the rhythm and movement of the cosmos, Nataraja is also regarded as God of the Arts, especially of the dance. Sarabhai adds:

A dancer becomes the being that he impersonates on stage. In the dance are aroused the entire energy of the body, mind, intellect and soul. It is a complete surrender to God.⁴¹

Another popular image of Shiva is the *lingam* or *Shivalinga*. This sculpture consists of a cylindrical column, the *linga*, protruding out of a hollow base, the *yonis*. Three white lines, which represent Shiva's third eye, are drawn onto the column. The *linga* and *yonis* have been commonly associated with the male and female genitalia and sexual union. Although not denied by Hindus, this interpretation is superficial. Swami Harshananda states:

Siva means auspiciousness, and *linga* means a sign or symbol. Hence the *Sivalinga* is just a symbol of the Great God of the Universe who is all-auspiciousness.⁴²

Swami Sivananda adds:

Lord Siva is really formless. He has no form of his own, yet all forms are His forms. All forms are pervaded by Lord Siva. Every form is the form or *Linga* of Lord Siva.⁴³

For Swami Sivananda the *linga* and *yonis* represent a communion which results in the manifested reality. This communion is beyond a mere sexual act, but rather it is a union between the idea, and the power to implement the idea which results in creation.

The union of the *Linga* with the *Yonis* symbolises the creation of this universe by Lord Siva in conjunction with His Sakti or Power.⁴⁴

For some Hindu scholars the *Lingam* is a symbolic

representation of the threefold image of the Ultimate Reality - that of creator, preserver and destroyer. It is for this reason that the lowest section of the *lingam* is referred to as Brahma; the middle, hollow section which supports the cylindrical section is called Vishnu; while the cylindrical section, the *lingam*, is referred to as Shiva. In this form, the devotee is reminded that ultimately there is just one God although there may be numerous facets to His Being.

The origin of the *lingam* is related in two myths. The first of these describes the *lingam* as the result of a curse placed on Shiva by the sage Brigu who was sent by the other sages to test the three gods of the triad to see who was supreme. When Brigu visits Shiva, he is not welcomed. Shiva was at this time either in meditation or with his wife Parvati. For this insult Brigu curses Shiva to be forever worshipped as the *lingam*.⁴⁵ In the second myth, Brahma and Vishnu are engaged in an intense argument about which of the two is the supreme creator of the universe, when they are interrupted by a gigantic, fiery *lingam* rising out of the cosmic ocean. Both Brahma and Vishnu decide to investigate the source of the *lingam*. Vishnu, in the shape of a boar, plunges downwards while Brahma, as a swan, investigates the upper portions of the *lingam*.⁴⁶ Although both gods continue in their upward and downward journeys for a thousand years, neither is successful. Both return

wearily to the starting point of their journey. At this point of the myth the *lingam* bursts and in a cavern inside Vishnu and Brahma see Shiva, whom they recognise as the Supreme Creator. Shiva reassures them by stating that all three of them are a part of the one and that each has a specific function to perform - as creator, sustainer and destroyer.⁴⁷

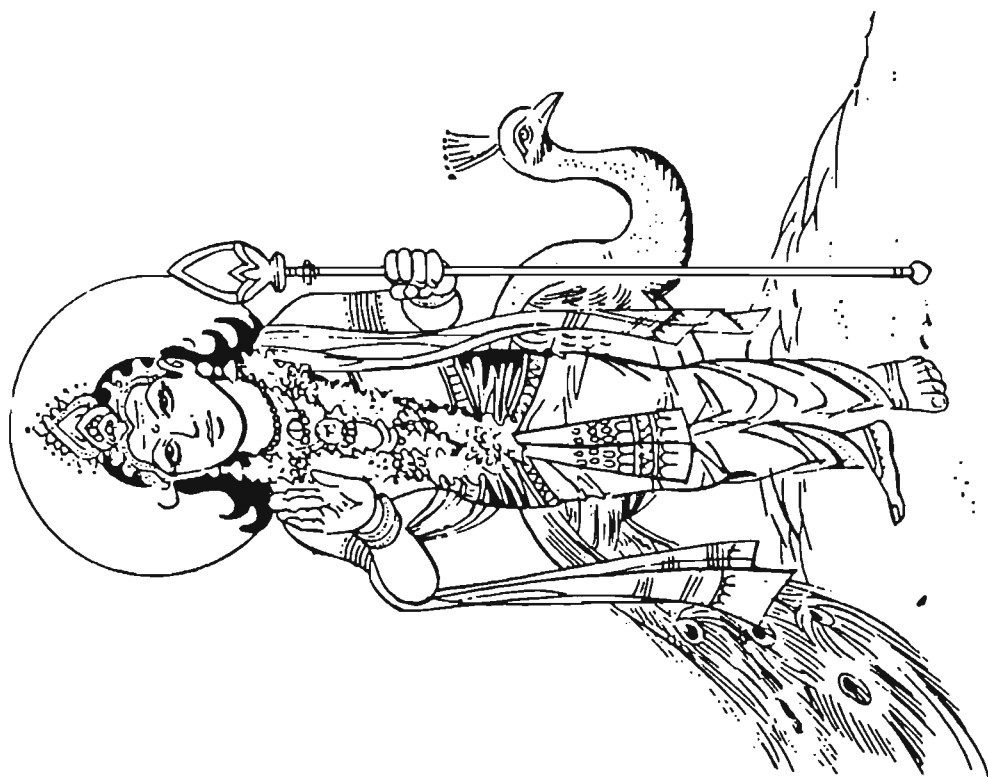
Other representations also emphasise the inseparable nature and oneness of the different aspects of God. *Hari-Hara*, for instance is a composite depiction of Vishnu and Shiva. He is represented as being vertically divided into two halves; one half bearing the physical attributes of Shiva while the other bears the attributes of Vishnu. As Dattatreya the threefold aspects of God are fused into one. Dattatreya has three heads which represent Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. In four of his six hands, he bears the instruments peculiar to the triad while his remaining two hands assume the gesture of reassurance and protection.⁴⁸

Another feature of Shiva worship is the importance placed on his vehicle, Nandi. For Hindus, Nandi, the bull, is more than a mere symbol of fertility and regeneration, it is a representation of Shiva's cosmic energy. According to Srivastava, "Each individual is the Nandi Bull, the vehicle and agent of Lord Shiva, the instrument of his creative powers."⁴⁹

Figure 3 : THE SONS OF SHIVA



B



A

GANESHA

Ganesha is popularly regarded as the elder son of Shiva, although in most accounts of his birth, Shiva's consort, Parvati, is his actual creator. He is usually depicted as a short, corpulent man with pink, red or yellow skin (figure 3B). Aside from his four arms, his most striking feature is his elephant's head which completes his image. His large ears and upturned or bent elephant's trunk are quite prominently featured while one of his two tusks is either broken or missing completely. A rope, an axe, a lotus flower, a conch shell, a discus, a club and Shiva's trident are amongst the articles he might hold in his hands.

There are many myths which account for Ganesha's birth and his acquisition of the elephant head. In one account Parvati, to prevent Shiva from surprising her while bathing, creates Ganesha from the scurf of her skin which she mixes with oils and finally sprinkles the mixture with water from the Ganges so that it might be brought to life. The result of this is the creation of Ganesha. Parvati then installs Ganesha as keeper of the door to her bath with explicit instructions that he should not allow anyone in. In attempting to perform his duty, Ganesha angers Shiva who decapitates Ganesha. Parvati is distressed at this and Shiva promises to bring Ganesha back to life by replacing his head with

that of the first living creature that passes by. This promise is carried out when an elephant arrives on the scene.⁵⁰ In another myth Parvati prays for a son and when she is granted one, she becomes so filled with pride that she summons the other gods to admire him. Sani (Saturn), realizing that his gaze could destroy anything, refuses to do so. Thinking that her son was beyond such a threat, Parvati forces Sani to look at Ganesha. Ganesha's head is immediately burnt. Brahma comforts Parvati by stating that if the first available head is fixed onto Ganesha's body, he would come back to life. An elephant's head is then used to restore Ganesha's life.⁵¹

The circumstances of his birth and his appearance have made his title, *Vighneswara* (Lord of all obstacles) apt. He is also called *Ganapati* or Lord of the Hosts or Attendants. This name refers to his role as Shiva's chief attendant. As Lord of all obstacles, Ganesha is invoked at the beginning of all Hindu rituals, or symbols related to him may feature prominently in such rituals. It is also a common practice amongst Hindus to commence the performance of any task, including such endeavours as building a house, undertaking a long journey and writing a book, by first paying tribute to Ganesha. A myth which explains Ganesha's precedence in rituals and further emphasises his role as Lord of all obstacles, has him in competition with his brother

Karttikeya. In this myth Shiva proposes a contest, in the form of a race, between the two brothers to see who would be fastest in circling the world. Karttikeya makes off immediately, but Ganesha, impeded by his stature, uses his wit to beat his brother. Ganesha walks around his parents, Shiva and Parvati, and declares to them that having walked around them, he has circled the world - his world. Pleased at this, Shiva immediately blesses his son and declares that Ganesha would always be first amongst the gods.⁵² An off-shoot of this myth is Ganesha's role as god of learning and of wisdom. It is for this reason that Brahma summons Ganesha to act as scribe to Vyasa when he was composing the *Mahabharata*. Thus Ganesha is also associated with literature and the arts.

The writing of the *Mahabharata* is often cited as a possible reason for Ganesha's loss of one tusk. It is believed that Ganesha uses one of his tusks to take down Vyasa's dictation of the *Mahabharata*. Another myth accounting for this loss has Ganesha in his role as Lord of the Attendants. Ganesha is tending the door to an apartment in which Shiva is asleep when Parasuram, Vishnu's sixth avatar, calls on Shiva. Not wishing to disturb his father, Ganesha refuses entrance to Parasuram. A duel ensues which finally results in Parasuram throwing his axe at Ganesha. *Ganesha* recognises the axe as belonging to his father. Out of

respect and in great humility Ganesha does not retaliate but allows the axe to sever one of his tusks.⁵³ In yet another myth, Ganesha snaps off his tusk to aim at the moon who had laughed at the rotund form of Ganesha after he had fallen from his vehicle (a mouse or rat).⁵⁴

For most Hindus the broken or missing tusk symbolises one's liberation from vanity and egotism, obstacles in the path to spiritual growth. This is amply evident in the first two myths concerning the loss of the tusk. In both instances Ganesha does not hesitate or have recourse to vanity when one of his tusks is threatened. In the third myth Ganesha is angered not because he is being mocked but because the very act of mockery is vain. The act of throwing his tusk at the moon is his means of chastisement so that this obstacle (of vanity) might be overcome. The axe, discus and club which Ganesha carries may also be interpreted as weapons which destroy the material and physical obstacles that need to be overcome so that spiritual growth is not impeded. The rope and conch shell serve as guides which lead the aspirant seeker of truth on the path to its discovery.

The rat, Ganesha's *vahana* or vehicle, is a resourceful creature which has a curious ability to tackle even the most formidable task with tenacity. This is most

evident in its ability to obtain food. There is also a certain absurdity in imagining the large, rotund Ganesha being conveyed by a tiny rat. For Hindus the very nature of this absurdity is a confirmation of Ganesha's functions.

KARTTIKEYA

This deity is popularly known by several names which include *Skanda*, *Kumara*, *Muruga*, *Subrahmanya* and *Shunmukha*. These names supply hints to both his role in the Hindu Pantheon, and his origins. Swami Saradananda in his paper, Philosophical View of Muruga and Muruga Worship, quotes Ratna Navaratnam who maintains that "*skanda* or *kumara* is blended of aspects of the *Rig Vedic* Soma, Agni, Indra, Varuna, Brhaspati and Hiranyagarbha...."⁵⁵ The popularity of this deity amongst the Dravidians of Southern India, indicates that some assimilation had taken place between the Aryan deities which Navarathnam mentions, and a Dravidian deity of similar characteristics.

In modern Hinduism Karttikeya's chief role is that of god of war or defender of the gods and therefore replaces the *Vedic* deities Indra and Agni. His dedication to battle is evident in his shunning all other distractions, including women. It is for this

reason that he is also called *Kumara* or bachelor. There are some accounts which maintain that he has a wife called Devasena and that he had courted the wives of Ganesha, Siddhi and Buddhi. These unions are a rather cryptic way of illustrating Karttikeya's single mindedness in military exploits, since the name Devasena means 'the army of the gods', while Siddhi and Buddhi refer respectively to success and prosperity.⁵⁶

Karttikeya is generally accepted as being the younger son of Shiva and Parvati. In most myths he is born so that he might defeat and destroy a demon (usually Taraka) who is a threat to the world. The most popular of these myths involves Kama's visit to, and destruction by, Shiva. In this account the gods believe that the only way they can be rescued from the threats of Taraka is with the help of a son born to Shiva and Parvati. Shiva's meditation makes conception impossible, hence the need for Kama's visit. Although Shiva destroys Kama, he is not totally unmoved by Kama's deed. His desire has been aroused, but he does not give in to his passion. The gods send Agni who, in the form of a dove, collects Shiva's semen. The semen is too heavy to be carried by any of the lesser gods and Agni soon drops his burden as he flies over the Ganges. When this occurs, a beautiful child, Karttikeya, ascends from the Ganges.⁵⁷

In another myth the gods appeal directly to Shiva for help. Shiva obliges and conjures up five more heads for himself. Each of these heads has a central eye from which a spark is emitted. These six sparks land in a lake and are born as six boys. These boys are nursed by the pleiades or *Krittikas*. Parvati hugs all six boys when she sees them. Her hug is so powerful that the six boys are fused and become a single body with six heads. Karttikeya derives his name from the *Krittikas* who nurse him, while his name Shunmukha is a direct reference to his six faces.⁵⁸

There are two popular representations of Karttikeya. In one he has six heads, twelve hands and is seated upon a peacock. His hands bear the *vel* (spear), arrow, sword, discus, noose, cock, bow, shield and conch while two hands assume the gesture of giving and protection. In the other image of Karttikeya, he is a handsome, single-headed young man dressed in royal robes (figure 3A). In one hand he carries his *vel* while the other gestures protection. In this form, he is commonly referred to as Muruga and his *vahana*, the peacock, is usually depicted at his side.

Karttikeya's weapons immediately reveal his occupation as Lord of Battles. He symbolises the eternal battle between good and evil. His weapons are much more than instruments which draw blood and kill, these weapons

have healing powers (since they are used to remove all forces of evil) and offer protection as well. This is evident in the following prayer which Swami Saradananda quotes in his paper:

Oh Shanmuga will thou not use thy charmed lance So penetrating and powerful to drive away the fearsome fatal powers that sway over my body, Be they birds or beast or bacterial ailments.⁵⁹

THE CONSORTS OF THE GODS

A peculiar form of worship which has developed amongst Hindus is the conception of God as a benevolent mother. If God is the architect of the universe then He has to have some kind of creative force or energy which would successfully effect His plans and give it concrete form. God's creative energy (called Sakti) is conceived as being a mother figure who caringly creates, protects or sustains and finally dissolves that which she has brought into being. Bhattacharya states that the mother goddess, Sakti, is "the personification of primordial energy and the source of all divine and cosmic evolution. She is identified with the Supreme Being, conceived as the source and spring as well as the controller of all the forces and potentialities of nature."⁶⁰ Sakti has a personality and role which run parallel to that of Brahma. In Hindu mythology Sakti, or the creative energy of God, is represented as the

spouses of the major deities. Since Brahman or God is essentially conceived as a triad of gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, His Sakti is also seen as a three fold manifestation. It is these manifestations of Sakti that have gained popularity amongst Hindus.

Like Brahma, the creator, his consort, Sarasvati, is strongly associated with knowledge and learning. The origin of this deity is obscure, but her name indicates that she must have had a strong association with the River Sarasvati. The life giving energy of the river must have made such a strong impact on the lives of the communities living alongside its banks, that its deification became a necessary adjunct to the development of the religion of these communities. By the time the *Rig Veda* came to be composed, Sarasvati's association to sound (of the river and perhaps, the hymns sung on its banks) has led to the belief that she served as a prototype for or is indeed the *Vedic* deity Vak. Vak is a deification of sound, the source of all knowledge. Le Meé adds, "This word of knowledge, of wisdom - the sound of Truth itself - is the source and nourisher of Creation."⁶¹

Sarasvati's function as the goddess of knowledge includes her patronage of the arts (particularly poetry and music), sciences, skills and crafts. These functions are vividly portrayed in images of her.

Figure 4 : THE CONSORTS OF BRAHMA AND VISHNU



Seated on a peacock, swan or lotus flower, Sarasvati wears a white sari (figure 4B). Her association with sound is symbolised in the veena⁶² which she plays with two of her hands. Her role as goddess of knowledge is also alluded to in the prayer beads and manuscript which she carries in her remaining two hands.

Lakshmi is one of the few Hindu goddesses who is very strongly associated with her male counterpart. As the consort of the protector or sustainer of the universe, Vishnu, she performs the function of goddess of fortune and prosperity. Her birth is related in the myth concerning the churning of the ocean of milk. As the ocean is churned, it throws out treasures and precious objects which are then claimed by the gods. Lakshmi, seated on a lotus, is one of the objects which rises out of the ocean. She is claimed by Vishnu and is his companion on his several descents to earth. She is therefore believed to be incarnated as Sita, Rama's wife, and as Radha and Rukmini, the love interests in Krishna's life. Because she was born seated on a lotus flower, she is also called Padma, the lotus.⁶³ Her strong association with the lotus flower is represented in images of her in which she either sits or stands on a lotus flower and in two of her four hands (if she is represented as having four) she holds the lotus flower (figure 4A). Since Lakshmi is also strongly associated with beauty, grace and fidelity, she is commonly

represented as having just two hands from which gold coins appear to be falling. Another feature of images of Lakshmi, which allude to her function as goddess of good fortune, is the red sari and jewellery that she wears.

Perhaps one of the more complex of the Hindu goddesses is Devi or Parvati, the consort of Shiva. Like her husband, she appears to be contradictory. As the female principle of the destroyer, Devi is portrayed as being both benevolent and terrifying. Her numerous incarnations and personalities, characterize this contradiction. Kali and Durga, slayers of wrong doers and demons, are commonly presented as ferocious and are associated with blood and violence. Uma, Gauri and Mariammen show their love of mankind by their generosity and kindness. Since Devi assumes a multiplicity of forms and personages which vary from the mild goddess of fertility and harvest to the fierce and terrifying destroyer of evil, the symbolism and imagery associated with this goddess will be discussed as they occur in the ritual to be dealt with later in this thesis.

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CHAPTER THREE

HINDUISM IN PRACTICE

In Chapter Two of this study Hinduism has been described as a way of life which controls one's material existence so that the ultimate destiny of life may be realised. It is in this light that *Karma* or action becomes a necessary part of Hinduism, since it is by way of action that the individual attains self-realization which finally leads to *moksha* and eternal bliss. For the Hindu action may take two forms: material or spiritual. Material action stems from deeds designed to improve the quality of the life of others, while spiritual action involves deeds which lead to personal God-realization. Since material action is secular and refers, in the main, to acts of charity, it falls outside the ambit of this study. In considering Hinduism in practice, therefore, the focus shall be on spiritual action.

Spiritual action involves worship and contemplation of God, which, for the Hindu, are acts of faith. In worship the Hindu places his complete trust in God for the sustenance, preservation and final deliverance of his soul from the bondage of material existence.

Worship is a pledge to God that the individual accepts God as the ultimate destiny of his soul. In this manner, spiritual action becomes an act of *dharma* which makes it possible for the individual soul to evolve (in various life times) until it is worthy to be accepted by God - the Ultimate Reality.

Spiritual action involves paying homage to or worshipping God. For the Hindu, worship generally takes two forms. It might be meditative, demanding the concentration of one's mental energy on God, or it might take the form of a series of ritualized actions performed in honour of God. Since both forms of worship involve God-contemplation, both are considered equally valid. Krishna (the eight avatar of Vishnu) makes the following comment to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

As men approach me so do I accept them:
men on all sides follow my path, O Partha
(Arjuna)¹

Hinduism also accepts as a fact that mankind is not intellectually equal: intellectual development is strongly linked to the spiritual evolvment of the individual. It therefore becomes necessary for each individual to approach God according to his spiritual and intellectual ability. It is not the manner of worship which is important but the need it fulfils. Worship, in whatever form, is seen as the discipline

required to attain the ultimate goal of Hinduism. Krishna's comment, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, makes this quite clear:

Those who fixing their minds on Me worship Me, ever earnest and possessed of supreme faith - them do I consider most perfect in yoga.²

Yoga is the discipline that is required for the ultimate union between the individual soul and God. According to Swami Nirvedananda *yoga* may refer to the different paths an individual might choose to achieve this union. Each of these paths is determined by the individual's predisposition which is dependent upon his intellectual and spiritual growth.³ Most Hindus recognise three such paths which might best suit each individual:

One may try to reach God through work (*karma*), or meditation and knowledge (*jnana*), or simply through devotion (*bhakti*).⁴

In establishing the path best suited to the individual, Hinduism recognises the limitations of the human mind in meditating upon a formless, unmanifested God. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna asks Krishna whether the devotee who worships the manifested form of Krishna or the devotee who meditates upon the formless and imperishable nature of God, has 'the greater knowledge of yoga'.⁵ Krishna replies that both forms of worship

attain the same goal and are equally acceptable.

Krishna adds:

The difficulty of those whose thoughts are set on the Unmanifested is greater, for the goal of the Unmanifested is hard to reach by the embodied beings.⁶

Radhakrishnan offers the following comment on this verse:

The Immutable does not offer an easy hold to the mind and the path is more arduous. We reach the same goal more easily and naturally by the path of devotion to the Personal God, by turning godward all our energies, knowledge, will and feeling.⁷

Because of the need to worship a recognizable God, one who has a form and a history to which the individual can relate, we find *Bhakti* to be the most common form of worship amongst Hindus and, as such, forms the focus of this study.

BHAKTI

The origins of *Bhakti* are lost in the remote past of Hindu civilization although traces of this cult are to be found in the ancient Indus Valley civilizations of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Commenting on the religious

life of these civilizations, Majumdar states:

Of their religious culture some traces are left in their icons which include the mother-goddess, the phallus, and a male god who has been regarded as Siva.⁸

The content of these icons bear a remarkable similarity to the more prominent features of *Bhakti*. Majumdar points out that "many traits of later Hinduism, specially those which cannot be directly traced to the *Vedas*, might have been a legacy of these unknown people."⁹ .

It may therefore be assumed that *Bhakti* has its roots in the civilizations of the Indus Valley and is pre-Vedic. The form it has taken in modern Hinduism is the result of a fusion of *Vedic* and pre-Vedic ideologies and practices. Its rise to prominence in Hindu worship was given impetus during the age of the epics and *Puranas* which Sarma dates from 200 BC to 650 AD.¹⁰

Bhakti refers to the worship of a personal God with love and adoration as opposed to the austere and contemplative worship of an impersonal, remote and imageless God. Sen adds that the emphasis of *Bhakti* is "in the Supreme Person rather than in the Supreme Abstraction."¹¹ The 'Supreme Abstraction' or God is perceived as a composition of various aspects which

have a bearing on human existence. Each of these aspects is given a concrete form and a name and it is in this guise that God is worshipped. God may be worshipped as Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, or Mariammen, the healer of diseases or He may be the sustainer of life and the destroyer of evil, as manifested by Vishnu and his avatars. Many such deities, popularized by *Bhakti*, are to be found in Hinduism.

Hindus might show more interest in, and elevate the status of a particular deity but at no time is any one deity regarded as the Supreme God. Each deity is recognised as being a representation of a particular aspect of God. As a result of this an individual does not feel restricted in the number of Gods he might worship. Although there may be a specific aspect or form of God to which an individual is especially partial; he may, if he so desires, worship other forms of God as well. The followers of Vishnu, for instance, might on specific occasions worship Siva as well (as is evident in the festival of *Shivaratri*, celebrated in honour of Siva).

THE ROLE OF MYTHOLOGY AND SYMBOLS IN *BHAKTI*

Mythology has shaped the character and main features of *Bhakti*. Through myth and legend, the various deities

are given recognisable characters. This is an important aspect of *Bhakti* since this phenomenon requires the individual to relate to and identify with a particular deity. This is accomplished in two ways. Firstly, the deities are given a human form to which certain features might be added (such as extra heads or arms) to emphasise their super-human qualities. Secondly mythology supplies a biographical history in which the deeds of the Gods are related. In this way the aspects of God which the deities represent become more accessible and comprehensible. Vishnu's association with the preservation of life and removal of evil is amplified in the many myths which relate his accomplishment of these feats. Shiva's role as the destroyer and Brahma's as the creator are likewise strengthened and given substance in myths. Swami Nikhilananda sums up the need for bringing God within the reach of man in the following comment:

As long as the worshipper regards himself as a human being, he finds it easier to commune with a humanised God. Such a God can listen to prayers, answer them, and accept worship. Men can love Him and receive His love in return. Worshipers generally establish a definite relationship with the Deity, regarding Him as Master, Father, Mother, Friend, Child, or Beloved.¹²

A further characteristic of *Bhakti* is the use of symbols in various religious practices. These concrete

symbols are an important adjunct to Bhakti worship since it is through these visual stimuli that the individual is able to direct his attention towards God. As Stutley points out:

Indian images and religious paintings are basically 'pictures' of various aspects of religious belief, which function as aids to meditation and the understanding of spiritual truths. Therefore an image is designed primarily to express ideas rather than to portray the likeness of anything. It should be regarded as a reflected image of the Supreme Being, although from the philosophical viewpoint the godhead is necessarily formless and devoid of attributes. But few people are able to worship an abstraction and therefore the inconceivable Reality is conceived of as a Being with attributes, the creator, preserver and destroyer of the cosmos. During worship the image is said to be suffused with the presence of God, and it is God who is worshipped, not the image itself.¹³

Finally, mythology provides the background to many of the religious rituals which feature so prominently in Hindu worship. For the average Hindu, participation in the religion's many rituals is an affirmation of his religious convictions. He may understand the religious doctrines and philosophy and be able to quote specific scriptures and myths to illustrate a point, but it is in religious ritual that he comes closest to experiencing the religion. Hindu mythology, with its inherent symbolism, provides an appealing means of

bringing life and adding colour to the major principles of the religion, and by participating in rituals the Hindu is able to close the gap between philosophical doctrine and self-realization. Mythology provides the means towards understanding the Truth, while ritual brings practical and concrete fruition to the essence of this understanding (thereby creating an even greater awareness of the world and God). Ritual is a cathartic experience which changes one's perception of life and ultimately leads to an acute awareness of the goal of existence and the manner in which this goal might be achieved.

SOME FEATURES OF HINDU WORSHIP

Hindu worship is strongly influenced by the *Bhakti* phenomenon. God is brought within the general experience of the individual because God is not perceived as an abstraction dwelling in some remote heaven. For this reason the Hindu sees his relationship with God in human terms. This does not mean that God is made an equal; rather God is looked upon as a respected elder of the family unit or community who must be treated with deference and respect. Although His abode is generally believed to be a temple, He also occupies a special place within the household where He is treated as an important and respected guest.

Worship, for the Hindu, is a festival, a celebration of God's presence on earth. One of the basic beliefs of the religion is that every object created originates from and in God. This necessarily implies that all manifested objects, both animate and inanimate, are infused with the presence of God. Swami Nikhilananda sums up the Hindu approach to worship:

Popular worship in India is generally pervaded by a spirit of joyousness and merriment. The atmosphere of the temple is not gloomy or heavy, but reverberates with songs, hymns and shouts of mirth. This is mainly due to the fact that a Hindu really feels in the shrine the presence of the deity, who is the embodiment of bliss.¹⁴

Swami Nikhilananda supplies two basic reasons for the need to worship amongst Hindus: "either for the fulfilment of worldly desires or for the ultimate deliverance from the bondage of the world."¹⁵ The former is usually undertaken after a vow in which a devotee decides to observe a certain religious festival to obtain relief from a particular problem. The latter form of worship is evident in the performance of daily prayer and rituals related to the different stages of life - beginning at conception and ending with death. Except for the major religious festivals, Hindu worship is not congregational but is regarded as a private affair. As a result of this, temple worship is not

regarded as a necessity and as a place of worship the home is favoured. Home worship is also favoured because to the Hindu, worship is a means of sustaining family unity and harmony.

WORSHIP AT HOME

Every Hindu home has a specially designated space devoted to prayer and worship. Since God is regarded as a guest within a household, this space is treated with special care, deep respect and devotion. The space may be an entire room in the home or the garden, or it may be a simple cabinet placed in a corner of a room. Various symbols are arranged within each of these spaces. The more popular symbols are pictorial and sculptural representations of deities, and utensils, (usually brass) which are used in the performance of religious rituals. These utensils may include little water containers, incense stick holders and a hand held lamp which is used for the ignition of camphor cubes. The focus of this arrangement is usually a clay or brass lamp which is lit before the commencement of any ritual.

The lamp is usually referred to as *Lutchmi* or *Kamatchiamma Vilaku*.¹⁶ The striking feature of the brass lamp is the back plate which is in the shape of

an open fan. It creates the impression of light or radiance reaching outwards. At the middle of the back plate is an impression, in relief, of the goddess Lutchmi seated on a lotus flower. Both the goddess Lutchmi and the lamp are regarded as symbols of good health, prosperity and happiness. They are important symbols used in Hindu worship and are to be found in every Hindu home. The lamp's importance is closely linked to the Hindu concept of light. This may be represented by the little flame of the lamp or a huge blazing fire. Many commentators, on first encountering what Chaudhuri calls 'an exultant veneration of light',¹⁷ mistake the actual worship of light with the Hindu's acceptance of light as symbolic of God. Light is regarded as a means of focusing on God and symbolises the essence of Hindu philosophy, which could be summed up on the following mantra.

*Asato ma sād gamaya,
tomaso ma joythir gamaya
Mrityor ma amritam gamaya
(O God, Lead us from untruth to truth;
Lead us from darkness to light,
Lead us from death to immortality.)¹⁸*

By lighting the sacred lamp or igniting the sacred fire, the Hindu attempts to symbolically remove darkness, which represents obstacles in the path to the attainment of the ultimate Truth and God realization. Evil, anger, greed, jealousy, egotism and vanity are all a part of the darkness which restrains man from

attaining liberation. According to Pundit Vedalankar, the lighting of the physical flame "takes the spiritual form when it disciplines the mind and the intellect and kindles the inner spiritual light of the *atma* (soul) and it burns up evil desires such as anger, greed, jealousy, pride, etc., with the fire of knowledge.¹⁹

Central to home worship, is the daily lighting of the lamp. This might be performed twice daily - at sunrise and at sunset; but for practical purposes this ritual is usually performed at sunset. The lamp is lit before the evening meal and before any electric light is switched on. An incense stick is also ignited and the family may then chant a *mantra* or sing a *bhajan*.²⁰ Each member of the family then steps before the lamp and performs the *arti*. This is performed by holding a hand-held lamp, which contains an ignited camphor cube, in the right hand and rotating it around the lamp and other religious symbols which occupy the prayer place. Thereafter a few drops of water are sprinkled and the individual then prostrates himself before the lamp. At the end of this ritual, each member of the family applies the sacred ash or *vibhuti* onto his forehead.

Besides being a religious ritual, the daily prayer has the effect of uniting the individual members of a family into a unit: the act of rotating the hand-held lamp could be interpreted as a re-enactment of the

harmony that exists in the cosmos. In the performance of this ritual, the individual strives to attain a similar harmony in his own existence. This is further emphasised by the offering of water which, besides having purifying qualities, has the effect of binding different elements. By prostrating himself before the lamp, the individual strives to rid himself of his ego as he humbles himself before God. The individual recognises that God-realization is the ultimate goal of existence by applying the sacred ash onto the forehead. Like Shiva's third eye, the ash on the forehead is symbolic of the intuitive thought that has been acquired after sincere prayer. The ash, which Shiva, in his guise as an ascetic, applies to his own body, is a reminder to the devotee that one's material existence is transient and that one's physical body soon disintegrates and becomes dust; the soul is immortal and one's material existence should be a means towards attaining God-realization and ensuring the liberation of the soul from the bondage of physical manifestation.

Home worship is not restricted to daily prayer. Many festivals, including Pongal - the harvest festival and Ramnaumi - the birthday of Lord Rama, are observed at home. On such occasions the rituals associated with the daily prayer are incorporated into the festival.

TEMPLE WORSHIP

Temples are generally considered to be the abode of a living God. It is for this reason that each temple is dedicated to and named after a particular deity. The temple compound at Umgeni Road in Durban, for instance, comprises three temples. The largest of these is dedicated to Shiva, another to Vishnu and the third to Mariamman, an incarnation of Parvati - Shiva's *Sakti*. Although each temple is dedicated to a single deity, the temple does not become the exclusive abode of that deity. Symbols and images of other deities are housed within each temple. At the Narainsamy Temple in Newlands, Durban, which is dedicated to Vishnu, images of Ganesha and Muruga (or Karttikeya) flank the central recess or niche containing the image of Vishnu.

Temples might differ in the prominence given to different deities but there are certain features which are common to all temples.²¹ As one approaches the entrance to the temple one encounters a flagpole, an altar and the *vahana* or vehicle of the deity to whom the temple is dedicated. The flag pole is used only on festival days. The flag, emblazoned with a symbol of the deity to be honoured, is hoisted to announce that a festival has commenced. The altar (the *Balipeedam*) usually contains a black rounded stone. At the Narainsamy Temple in Newlands, the stone orb is the

first feature one passes. This is followed by the flag pole and then the statue of Garuda, Vishnu's vahana, within a canopied altar-like structure. On either side of the main door to this temple, one encounters small statues of a mouse and a peacock, the vehicles belonging to Ganesha and Muruga respectively.

Within the temple, on the wall facing the main door, are niches. These niches are the sanctums within which the images of the deities that are honoured at that particular temple are housed. The central niche usually has a deeper recess than the other niches and houses the symbol or image of the main deity of the temple. The Narainsamy Temple has a painted sculpture of Vishnu (also known as Narainsamy and Perumalsamy by Tamil-speaking Hindus) in the central niche, while at Umgeni Road the *lingam*, the symbol associated with Shiva, occupies this position. On either side of the central sanctum, at the Narainsamy Temple, there are smaller recesses which house images of Muruga and Ganesha. Outside the temple, the vehicles of the deities are usually positioned directly opposite the sanctum containing the deity. The other walls of the temple may also contain niches or sanctums which house other deities. The Umgeni Road Temple has further niches in the northern wall. The deities housed here include Nataraja (Shiva in his guise as Lord of the Dance) and the female consorts Lutchmi, Sarasvathi, and Gengamma.

As one leaves the temple one encounters, to the left, an altar containing nine female figurines in rows of three. These figurines are *Navagraha*, the symbolic representation of the nine planets of the solar system.

Worship at a temple is varied. It may be private, communal or a mixture of the two. For most Hindus, temple worship is private. Hofmeyr and Oosthuizen point out that the temple "only becomes the focus of the community on the great feast days or festivals."²² On these occasions, temple worship becomes communal. Temple festivals are usually seasonal or in honour of a deity. Pongol is a seasonal harvest festival while Ganesha Chaturti is a festival to celebrate the birthday of Shiva's son, Ganesha. Private worship at a temple involves a number of rituals, is contemplative and can be practised whenever the individual desires to do so. Most often private worship is motivated by the need to be relieved of some distress, as in the case of illness. On other occasions God may be thanked for His generosity or His blessing may be sought.

The Hindu devotee who enters the precincts of a temple for the purpose of worship has to undergo several changes of mental attitude and perception. He enters a world of symbols which have to be understood as being not merely representative of specific religious beliefs, but as the living embodiment of such beliefs.

Quite simply, the devotee enters a land of 'make believe' in which his every deed has a special significance and every symbol he encounters has a particular meaning. A peacock strutting about the temple grounds is not just a beautifully plumed bird to be admired, it is Muruga's vehicle and as such becomes an object for reverence. The various sculptural images he encounters are more than stone which has been fashioned to convey an image of a deity - they are the deities themselves and need to be treated with piety, genuflection and adoration. The various acts of worship which are performed by the devotee before these symbols have to be genuine actions prompted by the need to pay homage. One devotee stated that a very real need is met by these mental transformations. He explained that it would be totally absurd if one knowingly attempted to pay obeisance to a piece of stone as just an ordinary piece of stone. Although the various concrete symbols aid in focusing the devotee's meditation on God as the formless, unmanifested reality, it is equally true that these images and symbols are man-made and are inanimate. It therefore becomes necessary for the devotee to alter his perceptions so that his deeds of worship would have meaning. When fruit is offered to the stone image of a deity, the devotee is aware that such an offering would not be accepted or eaten by the image. He knows that such offerings (called *prasadam*) would be eaten by some other person. But the act of

making an offering, albeit to a stone image, is a commitment, an indication of faith on the part of the devotee and it is this act which would eventually determine his *dharma*.

The whole process of altering one's perception so that one accepts the temple as the abode of a living God, is built into the ritual of temple worship. Before entering the temple, the devotee performs a few rituals outside the temple, beginning with walking around the temple three times. At various points (usually at the four corners of the temple) the devotee may light cubes of camphor. Naidoo describes the act of walking around the temple as "representative of a pilgrimage."²³ This act also serves as a means of focusing one's mental energy on God. Walking is an action which demands a purpose, an ultimate destination. In this instance, the destination is an audience with God. By involving himself in this action, the devotee begins to focus his attention on his destination, and in so doing, he rids himself of secular thoughts. The lighting of camphor at various points of the walk is symbolic of removing darkness or impurities which might cloud one's thoughts: the Hindu believes that the act of worship should be an act of total giving, of complete commitment.

After completing this walk, the devotee then approaches the *Balipeedam*. At the *Balipeedam* he closes his eyes and meditates momentarily upon God. This stone orb represents a further step towards losing one's sense of the material world. The hard stone is symbolic of one's ego which is difficult to deny. At the *Balipeedam*, the devotee attempts to divest himself of his last remaining vestige of the material world, his ego. Naidoo adds that the "*Balipeedam* is an altar, a symbolic representation of a sacrificial altar, on which one sacrifices the evil of one's personality for the sake of purity and goodness when meeting God within the shrine."²⁴ The devotee may at this stage ignite another camphor cube at a specially designated spot on the *Balipeedam*.

He then approaches the sculptured image of the *vahana* whose permission must be sought before entering the temple. The devotee does not speak or chant aloud, he merely stands beside the *vahana* momentarily and then proceeds into the temple. This act of seeking permission is a humbling deed. By this act the devotee is finally stripped of all vanity and material obsession and is now ready to appear before, and worship the deities within the temple.

The devotee first approaches the niche containing the image of Ganesha. At no time is the devotee allowed to

enter the various niches. Only the temple priest, who acts as a mediator, is allowed within these areas. The devotee may offer a silent prayer or seek the temple priest's assistance to make an offering of a coconut. The priest, who accepts the coconut from the devotee on behalf of Ganesha, holds the coconut in his right hand, with the fingers of his left hand lightly touching his right elbow (a gesture of supplication). The priest then performs the *arti*, with the coconut, around the image of Ganesha; the coconut is then broken into two parts which are placed on either side of the image of Ganesha. The devotee, in silent prayer, would be standing with both hands clasped, palms together. This ritual heralds the beginning of worship. Homage to Ganesha is a prerequisite for all Hindu worship. As Ganesha is the Remover of All Obstacles, his assistance at the beginning of every endeavour, including prayer, is necessary, as any hindrance that might lie ahead can thereby be overcome. In worship, Ganesha clears the way and makes it possible for the main deity (the one who occupies the central niche at the temple) to receive one's prayer. The act of breaking the coconut is symbolic of the sacrifice of one's ego. This represents the final submission of one's entire being to God. The coconut has come to have strong associations with Ganesha, since both have links with the process of ridding oneself of one's ego and pride.

In an article titled "Symbolism in the offering of the coconut", the anonymous author likens the priest's stripping of the "twisted and knitted coir" which envelopes the coconut, and his final breaking of the hard shell to reveal the white kernel, while the milk is allowed to flow, to the stripping of one's "personality layers" and "the merging of the individual's self with the Infinite Self."²⁵

Having completed this ritual the devotee moves on to the central or main niche. The ritual here is the most important since the devotee's visit to the temple has been prompted by his need to worship the deity housed in this niche. Most devotees interviewed in the course of this study have stated that their visits to the temples were motivated by needs which ranged from illness to the acquisition of a job. The devotee chooses to worship a particular deity or at a particular temple according to his particular needs and not because of any other affiliation. Thus if the devotee seeks relief from illness, he would choose to pay homage to Mariamman, an incarnation of Shiva's *Sakti*, who is responsible for the removal of diseases; while Lutchmi would be worshipped if one desired good fortune.

When the devotee arrives at the central niche, the priest accepts the tray containing the devotee's

offering of fruit, which is placed in front of the sculptured image of the deity. Another coconut may be broken and the two pieces placed on either side of the fruit offering. The priest then ignites a camphor cube in a hand-held lamp and performs the *arti* around both the fruit offering and the deity. He may at the same time ring a bell and chant a few mantras. The mantras or chants usually proclaim the magnificence and mercifulness of the deity concerned. The following chant, widely used by Tamil speaking devotees of Shiva, praises the grandeur of Shiva:

*Ulagelam Unarndhu Odharku Ariyavan
Nila Vulaviya Neermali Vaniyan
Alagil Sodhiyan Ambalathu Aduvan
Malar Silambadi Vazhthi Vananguvam*

We shall bow down before the Dancer of the Ambalam at His feet, wearing anklets, which is the source for the world to sprout. He is imperceptible and unspeakable by the souls, and He possesses braided hair filled with water and adorned with the Crescent moon and a form of immense splendour.²⁶

The ringing of the bell alludes to the cosmic sound or vibration which resulted in the creation and which maintains the harmonious existence of the universe. The bell also summons the devotee to submit his entire being, including his thoughts, to God so that the prayer offered would be a genuine reflection of his faith in God.

At the end of the prayer, the priest applies *vibhuti* onto the forehead of the devotee. With his acquisition of a clearer vision and an altered perception of life, the devotee then pays his respects to the other deities housed within the temple. The final prayer is offered to the *Navagraha*, or the nine planets. Silent prayers are offered by the devotee as he circumambulates the altar containing the *Navagraha*, three times. The Hindu belief in the influence of planetary movement and astrology on one's life is amply evident in this final prayer. In paying his respects to the planets, the devotee expresses the desire to achieve, in his own life, the harmony that exists in the planetary movement. This prayer also expresses the wish that the celestial bodies would bestow good fortune and health on him.

In a final display of humility and respect, the devotee usually exits from the temple while facing the images of the deities. With his palms clasped together, the devotee walks backwards until he has passed all the images and symbols that are stationed immediately outside the entrance to the temple (including the *vahana* and *Balipeedam*).

CONCLUSION

Hindu worship is a means of directing the participant to a better understanding of himself, the goal of life and God. In attempting to achieve this, devotees are required to become active performers in the many festivals and rituals which characterise Hindu practices. One encounters many of the seeds of theatre and drama in these religious rituals. A scenario, based on popular mythology, song, music and dance feature prominently in Hindu worship. Hindu worship requires the devotee to suspend reality and adopt a new system of beliefs which results in an altered mode of perception and behaviour. Most religious festivals and rituals are divided into three distinct phases which gradually lead the participant into achieving a new awareness of himself and of the goals of the religion. The first phase is purificatory. The participant strives to cleanse himself physically and mentally, so that his participation in the rituals that follow could be genuine acts of faith. The second phase is the climax of religious festivals and it is in this phase that the participant acts out his faith by performing selfless deeds. The third phase is reached when the participant feels a sense of fulfilment, peace and

inner bliss. It is in this frame of mind that the devotee chants the concluding mantra used in most rituals:

Aum Shanti, Shanti, Shanti
(May there be peace).

CHAPTER THREE NOTES

1. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgita, p.158.
2. *Ibid.*, p.291.
3. Nirvedananda, Hinduism at a Glance, p.64.
4. K.M. Sen, Hinduism, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1981, p.39.
5. Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgita, p.291.
6. *Ibid.*, p.293.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, "Evolution of Religio-Philosophic Culture in India", in The Cultural Heritage of India Vol. III, Calcutta, Sri Ramakrishna Centenary Committee, n.d., p.6.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Sarma, Hinduism Through the Ages, pp.20-28.
11. Sen, Hinduism, p.91.
12. Swami Nikhilananda, Hinduism : Its Meaning for the Liberation of the Spirit, Madras, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1968, p.168.
13. Stutley, Hinduism, p.127.
14. Swami Nikhilananda, Hinduism, p.163.
15. *Ibid*
16. Kamatchi is a popular name, amongst Tamil speaking Hindus for the goddess Lutchmi. Vilaku is a Tamil word for lamp.
17. Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Hinduism : A Religion to Live By, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979, p.69.
18. This mantra occurs in the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad and is cited and translated by Pandit Nardev Vedalankar, Essential Teachings of Hinduism, Durban, Veda Niketan Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, 1979, p.81.
19. *Ibid.*, p.83.
20. A hymn.

21. A more detailed description of Hindu temple architecture in South Africa is contained in the following books:

Ranji S. Nowbath, Sookraj Chotai, and B.D. Lalla, editors, The Hindu Heritage in South Africa, Durban, The South African Hindu Maha Sabha, 1960.

Paul Mikula, Brian Kearney, and Rodney Harber, Traditional Hindu Temples in South Africa, Durban, Hindu Temple Publications, 1982.

22. J.H. Hofmeyr and G.C. Oosthuizen, Religion in a South African Indian Community, Durban, Institute for Social and Economic Research - University of Durban-Westville, 1981, p.13.
23. Thillayvel Naidoo, "Modes of Worship among Tamil People in South Africa", Durban, Department of Science of Religion - University of Durban-Westville, p.24.
24. *Ibid.*, p.25.
25. "Symbolism in the Offering of the Coconut", in Nathan, ed., Symbolism in Hinduism, pp.335-336.
26. K. Chellappa Gounder, ed. and trans., Pannira Thirumurai Thirattu, Durban, Siva Manram, 1970, p.177.

CHAPTER FOUR*HAVAN* - THE SACRED FIRE

The Sanskrit terms *Yajna* and *Havan*, which are commonly used by Hindus to describe the ritual of the sacred fire, mean 'sacrifice'. The term *yajna* is derived from the root *yaj* which means 'to worship'. Pundit Vedalankar adds the following meanings to this root:

Unification: bringing together for the sake of unified action for the good of all; classifying things according to their characteristics. Religious giving: using one's intelligence, strength and wealth, etc. with a spirit of service and good for all.¹

He adds:

The meaning of *yajna* is therefore to do good for all by performing actions collectively and without any motive. When any action is performed with this attitude one is not bound by the fruits of such actions because they are consecrated, pure and free from the desires for a reward.²

The word *havan*, on the other hand, is derived from the root *hawie* which means 'an oblation'. By performing the *havan*, the participant is offering an oblation into the sacred fire as a noble, selfless action which will be beneficial to all beings on earth while the participant himself does not expect any personal gains.

The earliest records of the performance of the *havan* or *yajna*, are to be found in the *Vedas* which are based on the Aryan culture that flourished in North India from about 2000 B.C.³ By the end of the Vedic age, the sacrifice had become a "mechanical and soulless activity".⁴ Sarma attributes this decline to the priests who emphasised "the great magical value of the meticulous performance of sacrifices" as a means of elevating their status to one of supremacy and importance.⁵ In reaction to this, and as a result of the fusion of Aryan and Dravidian cultures, the influence of the epics and *Puranas* and the rise of *Bhakti*, the cult of image worship made its appearance from 560 B.C.⁶ From this period the authority of the *Vedas* began to lose its influence and the performance of the *yajna* was relegated to a position of less importance in Hindu worship. Even today most Hindus perform the *yajna* or *havan* only at birth, marriage, death and at religious festivals dedicated to one of the deities of the Hindu pantheon and not, as the *Vedas* request, twice daily - at sunrise and sunset. Even on these occasions the *havan* is just one in a series of rituals which are performed to mark the affair.

During the modern period of Hindu history, which Professor Sarma dates from 1750 A.D., the influence of Hindu reformists began to make an impact on the religion.⁷ One of these reformists, Swami Dayananda,

founded the Arya Samaj movement in 1875. Sarma asserts that Swami Dayananda "took his stand on the infallible authority of the *Veda*."⁸ Swami Dayananda further emphasised the existence of one Supreme spirit (God) rather than a number of lesser 'gods' or deities. In his teachings, Dayananda maintained that these 'gods' merely represented aspects of the one Supreme Spirit. Being an ardent supporter of the religion as espoused by the Vedas, Dayananda also insisted on the performance of the *havan*. Followers of the doctrines of Swami Dayananda and the Arya Samaj, place a major emphasis on the performance of this ritual. For this Hindu sect, the *havan* is the focal point of any religious festival or ceremony related to the rites of passage.

THE SCENARIO OF THE *HAVAN*

The scenario of the *havan* is contained in the concept of creation as expounded by the Vedas. To understand the *Vedic* concept of creation it is important to examine the meaning and significance of the *Vedic* sacrifice. Miller concedes the difficulty in attempting to conceptualize the essence of the *Vedic* sacrifice and she therefore advises a discarding of "the current notions of sacrifice, including the idea of blood sacrifice".⁹ In his translation of the *Rig Veda*, Le Mée

interprets *yajna* (sacrifice) as an "act of total giving".¹⁰ This, however, falls short in explaining the full significance of the *Vedic* sacrifice. Panikkar states:

The conception of sacrifice found in the Vedas arises out of one of the two world views adopted by the human mind as it approaches the mystery of reality and seeks to discover therein the place of Man, that is, his human vocation. We could try to formulate this basic alternative in the following way. An early and universal human experience of the fact of change in the world or, in a world, that there is a becoming. Now, 'becoming' can be understood in two ways: as a 'coming from be(ing)' or as a 'coming to be(ing)'.¹¹

Panikkar further adds that 'coming from Be(ing)' implies

that nothing can become if it does not come from a Be, from a Being, that all that happens is potentially already there. This hypothesis assumes that there is a sort of infinite reservoir of possibilities, an infinite Being, a God, a Ground, ultimately responsible for all that is, for all becoming.¹²

It is this concept of 'becoming' that is significant when approaching the *Vedic* sacrifice. According to the *Vedas* God gives (sacrifices) a quarter of himself to begin the process of creation. The Cosmic *Yajna* which God performs to create the universe is contained in a hymn from the *Vedas* called the *Purusha Sukta*.¹³ The hymn is to be found, in different forms, in three of

the Vedas: Rig Veda, Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda.

The Rig Veda reveals:

Purusha is all this, all that was
and all that shall be. All the
multiplicity is within *Purusha*. He
is indeed the master of immortality.
(R.V. 10:90:2)

A quarter of his being is repre-
sented as the manifested universe
while three quarters of him remain
in eternal immortality.
(R.V. 10:90:3)

From that adorable lord of oblation,
fully offered, were obtained milk
and butter, and all the animals of
creation - the airborne, the wild
and the domesticated.
(R.V. 10:90:6)¹⁴

God, called *Purusha* in this extract, exists as the 'Be'
from which all things 'Become'. This 'coming from
Be(ing)' takes place when God offers 'a quarter' of
himself which results in the creation of the universe.
'A quarter of his being' could be interpreted as 'a
fraction of his being'. In other words, what we witness
as the visible reality of the universe represents
merely 'a quarter' or a fraction of God. For Panikkar

Creation is God's sacrifice, for not
only does God bring it into
existence, create it, but he also
permits it to return to him again.¹⁵

The performance of the ritual of the sacred fire, then,
is a recreation of God's Cosmic *Yajna*. As Miller points
out,

Of this mighty oblation, the human ritual is the microcosmic reflection. The underlying factor of the interlinkedness of all participants, their joining forces in a common re-enactment of the universal process of creation - the sacred work (*apas*) par excellence - is a peculiar characteristic of the Vedic conception of the sacrifice.¹⁶

Pannikar further adds that the fire ritual "represents the simplest possible form of the whole Vedic conception of sacrifice."¹⁷ By offering a quarter or a fraction of Himself as an oblation in the Cosmic *Yajna*, God creates the Solar Systems and life forms that inhabit and make up the universe. In a similar way the fire, into which man offers his oblation, transforms the oblations into substances which purify the environment which man inhabits. Pundit Vedalankar states that the fire breaks up the ingredients contained in the oblation into vapours which are 'germ destroying, health promoting and sweet smelling'.¹⁸

It is not only the physical environment which man inhabits that is purified, the spiritual level of man's existence is also cleansed. The *Yajur Veda* exhorts:

Perform *yajna* for the purification of vital breaths, the soul that resides in the body, the pervading air, the sun, the lightning, the air that protects multitudes of objects.
(Y.V. 22:30)¹⁹

The *yajna* also acts as a means of communication between man and God. In this act of communication the fire is the messenger. The fire of the *yajna* is personified in the *Vedas* as Agni, the high priest, presiding over the sacrifice.²⁰ Communication with God is established through Agni who receives the oblations and transforms it into smoke and vapours which travel into the atmosphere. It would be simplistic to interpret the smoke and vapours as the messages of man to God. Rather, it is the whole act of participating in the ritual, of offering not only an oblation into the fire but also his mind, heart and soul that man is able to achieve his communion with God.

The scenario of the ritual works on three levels. Firstly, it is the re-enactment of God's cosmic sacrifice which results in the creation of the universe. Secondly, it acts as a purifier of the environment. And thirdly, it establishes a means of communication between man and God. The chief agent of the ritual, on all three levels, is Agni - the fire. The opening lines of the *Rig Veda* make reference to Agni. This amplifies Agni's importance as a mediator between man and God:

*Om agnin ile purohitam
yajnas ya devam rtvijam
hotaram ratnadhataman*

I magnify God, the Divine Fire,
The Priest, Minister of the sacrifice,

the offerer of oblation, supreme giver of
Treasure

(R.V. 1.1.1)²¹

THE RITUAL OBSERVED

The following description of the ritual is based upon observations at the home of the D.K. Singh family who live in Reservoir Hills, Durban. This family belongs to the Arya Samaj Hindu sect. The only difference between the ritual as performed by the Arya Samaj and those performed by other Hindu sects is that the Arya Samaj direct their prayer to God as the Supreme Being whereas most other sects direct their prayer to a particular deity, or aspect of God, whose name is frequently chanted, such as Ganesha, Vishnu and Shiva.

As with most Hindu rituals, the initial phase of the *Havan* is purificatory. This is followed by the ignition of the fire and the offering of oblations into it. Finally, a prayer for peace brings the performance of the ritual to a close when all participants offer salutations to each other. During the first two phases a *mantra*,²² most often from the *Vedas*, is always chanted before any action takes place.²³

The focal point of the ritual is the *Havan kund* (figure 5A & B). The *kund* is a rectangular, hollowed receptacle into which pieces of wood are arranged before the

Figure 5 : THE HAVAN



B



D



A



C

commencement of the ritual. At the Singh home the ritual is usually performed in the lounge. The furniture is moved or pushed against the walls so that an empty space, at the centre of the room, is created. To protect the carpet from stray embers, newspaper and odd pieces of carpet are placed in the middle of the room. The *kund* is placed onto this. Further protection for the carpet is offered by grass mats which are placed on the floor, along the four sides of the *kund*. This also serves as a seating area for the participants. The settees around the room are used by participants and observers. These individuals do not make offerings throughout the ritual but they participate in the chanting and offer their oblations into the fire when the final offering is being made.

Before the commencement of the ritual, the family makes sure that everything that will be needed in the ritual is neatly arranged around the *kund*, within easy reach of the participants. These include little brass pots containing water and spoons, a brass pot containing *ghee* and a brass ladle, and brass trays which contain *samagree*. The *ghee* and *samagree* are the oblations which the participants offer into the fire. The *samagree* is made up of wood, roots, herbs, grain and on special occasions (such as on religious celebrations, like Deepavali) specially prepared sweetmeats are added to the *samagree*.

The ritual commences with the priest asking the participants to compose themselves, to focus their attention on the purpose of the ceremony and to direct their thoughts towards God. This part of the purification phase is aimed at cleansing the mind or the intellect. The priest then asks the participants to repeat the word *AUM*, three times.²⁴ The sound is chanted or intoned and because of the nature of the sound, a deep resonant vibration, the objective of clearing the participants' minds of thoughts unrelated to the ritual, is further enhanced. Hindus generally believe that *AUM* is one of the names of God. Pundit Vedalankar states:

Of all the names of God, *AUM* is supreme. *Aum* is the most comprehensive name of God. Other names denote only one aspect. That is the reason why *Aum* signifies only God and nothing else whereas other names stand for other things as well.²⁵

Hindus also equate the intoning of the sound to the cosmic vibration which resulted in the creation and which maintains the harmony of the cosmos. By repeating this sound three times, the participants' minds are immediately brought to focus and meditate upon the nature of God. Intoning the sound in unison also unites the individuals of the congregation into a single force. This has the effect of making the offering of oblations a group activity rather than an individual

activity. One of the aims of the *Havan*, to create unity and harmony, is achieved right at the beginning of the ritual.

Immediately after *AUM* has been intoned, the participants begin chanting the *Gayatri Mantra*. *Gayatri* refers to the metre in which the verse is written. Because of the popularity of this particular *mantra*, it is referred to by the name of its metre, i.e., the *Gayatri Mantra*.

*Om bhur bhuvah swah
Tatsavitur varenyam
bhargo devasya dhimayi
dhiyo yona pracodayat*

Panikkar translates this as

We meditate upon the glorious splendour
Of the Vivifer divine
May he illumine our minds.²⁶

For many Hindus the *Gayatri Mantra* is the most important and significant *mantra* of the *Vedas*. Pundit Vedalankar states that the *mantra* "has a purifying effect on the devotee".²⁷ He lists three ideas contained in this *mantra*:

1. God is the creator of the universe. He is everywhere and in all beings.
2. We meditate on His splendour and divine light.
3. We pray for purity of mind and knowledge of truth.²⁸

For Panikkar

The *Gayatri* is a complete symbol of light. It is certainly much more than the epiphany of light; it is light itself when the recitation is a real prayer, an assimilation to and identification with that which is prayed. Each line emphasizes one aspect of light: the glorious splendour of the ultimate, his own internal radiance, that is, the uncreatedness of light; the creating light, the communicative brightness of the uncreated sun, Savit, the brilliance of the living God who illumines everything (line 2); and finally the incidence of this divine light in our beings, and especially in our minds, making us refulgent ourselves and transmitters of the same refulgence and converting us into light: light from light, splendour from splendour, oneness with the source of light....²⁹

Once the *Gayatri mantra* has been chanted, each participant takes a little water in the right palm and sips it after repeating a *mantra* that has been chanted by the priest. The first *mantra*, which is chanted as an overture to the sipping of water, requests God to protect the participants from evil desires within themselves; while the second requests God's protection from evil from the outside.³⁰ The third *mantra* states:

*Om satyam yashah shrirmayi
shrih shrayatam swaha.*

Lord thou art ever existing. Thy splendour is seen all over. Thou art most beautiful and powerful. May we by thy grace attain purity and grace. This is my firm conviction and I surrender myself into thee.³¹

Water is regarded as a symbol of purity because of its cleansing qualities. The participant, by sipping the water, is symbolically cleansing himself or ridding himself of all evil desires and thoughts, and physical ailments. Pundit Vedalankar states that water 'protects us from sicknesses and it is the mainstay of life.'³²

In the next part of the purification rite water is again used as an agent of sustenance and remover of ailments. The participants take a little water in the left palm. They then dip the middle two fingers of the right hand into the water and with the moistened middle fingers, each of the following parts of the body is touched: the mouth, both nostrils, both eyes, both ears, both arms and both thighs. Both hands are then used to sprinkle the remaining water (in the left palm) over both shoulders. This is symbolic of sprinkling water over the entire body. While the participants touch each part of the body, a *mantra* is recited. This *mantra* requests God to maintain the normal functioning of the organs of speech, the sensory organs, the limbs and for the entire body to remain healthy and strong.

The purification rite is concluded at this stage and the ritual now enters the oblation phase. Although I have called the first phase a purification rite, the entire ritual has purification as one of the underlying themes. For Hindus, fire is a purifying agent. As a

giver of light, it removes darkness (both figuratively and literally) and as a consumer of matter, the fire is able to transform matter into smoke and vapours which act as purifying agents.

The second phase of the ritual begins with the ignition of the fire in the *Havan Kund* (figure 5C). The fire is usually ignited by the head of a household, normally a male. A camphor block is placed in the bowl of a long-handled spoon and is lit. At the same time the female head of the house ignites a few incense sticks and a clay lamp. The burning camphor is then dropped into the *kund* after the following *mantra* has been recited:

*Om bhurbhuvah swah, Om bhur bhuvah
swardyaauriva bhumna prithiviva varimna,
tasyaste prithivi deva yajani prishte agni
manna
da mannadyayadadhe.*

Pundit Vedalankar translates this as

My obligatory duties (dutious actions) shine like the (dyaauriva bhumna) heavenly objects and are (prithiviva varimna) beneficial like the earth. I (adadhe) establish this fire on the (prishte) surface of the (deva yajni) clean and dirt free platform. This fire is a symbol of the fire of the sun and electronic power. I make offerings of (annadam) grains and other ingredients into this fire, obtaining (annadhyaya) all kinds of edible things for my sustenance. (Swaha). This is my sincere conviction.

I am initiating my actions for the good of the world and to bring happiness to all beings.³³

Once the burning camphor block has been dropped into the *kund*, more wood is arranged within it. While this is being done, a *mantra* which states the aim of the *Havan* is chanted. The themes of selflessness and noble thoughts and actions are introduced in this *mantra*:

May this fire, established in the fire-place burn brightly, likewise may the fire of service started within my heart become illustrious. O! fire may you, the means and I, the devotee together accomplish our virtuous actions for our benefit and also for the benefit of all others without any selfish motives. May the ignitor of this fire and learned persons possessed of good qualities all come and sit at this *yajna* and make offerings together into this fire and this field of noble service.³⁴

The concept of God's sacrifice in the creation of the universe is introduced in the next step of this phase of the ritual. The participants, at this point, begin offering oblations into the fire (figure 5D). The offering of oblations, which act as fuel to sustain the fire, is a microcosmic mirroring of God's Cosmic *Yajna* which resulted in the creation. The mantras which are chanted during the oblation phase of the ritual always end with the phrase

idam na mama
(This is not for me)

This declaration by the participants indicates that for them 'sacrifice' means a giving up of ownership so that others might benefit, or a giving up to God. The participants at this stage of the ritual are entering into the spirit of the *Havan* which has as one of its goals - giving in charity as a selfless act. For Professor Varma

It makes a symbolic pronouncement on the part of the performer of the *yajna*, that 'After offering all that I have, in the form of this *Ahuti* (oblation), I renounce my claim towards anything remaining hereafter with me, as belonging to me.'³⁵

Varma adds that this feeling results in the participants' realising that their act of sharing is not the outcome of an attitude of pity but of a "sense of one's natural duty towards others; because ultimately that property does not belong to him alone."³⁶

The first offering into the fire takes the form of three sticks which are dipped in *ghee*. Each participant is given these three sticks and is required to offer them into the fire after chanting a specific *mantra*. Vedalankar translates these mantras:

1. O fire! the illuminator of all things, this characteristic of burning that gives cause to heat and light is the property of your existence. You become manifest by these. Become powerful and shine brightly and give lustre to other things as well. O fire! bless us with good children,

useful animals, light of knowledge, things of nourishment and other things beneficial to us. I am saying this with a firm conviction. This offering is to the fire that gives life to all things. It is not for me.

2. O performer of *yajna*, by the continuous use of wood keep this fire permanently alight. By means of *ghee* and *samagree* let it stay aflame and grow steadily. Make offerings of *Havan samagree* and other ingredients into this fire. This offering is for *Agni* and not for me. This fire is burning well. It is illuminous and is making all around shine. Make offerings of molten *ghee* into this fire.
3. You fire, who penetrates all objects, who joins all objects and also separates them, shine brightly. You receive your sustenance from *samagree*, *ghee* and wood. This offering is for the fire present in all objects. It is not for me.³⁷

The first and third *mantras* are directed to the fire while the second is directed to the participants of the ritual. The first and third *mantras* acknowledge God as the creator of the universe and of all life forms. The fire and its personification, *Agni*, become symbols of the creation. By means of the fire a 'coming from Be(ing)' is experienced. Nothing is what it was. The participants in this part of the ritual, by making offerings into the fire, are in a sense re-enacting God's Cosmic Sacrifice. Once the offerings come into contact with the fire, there is a change in its natural state. They combine with other ingredients of the oblation and become different substances with different properties. The smoke and vapours that issue from the fire are symbols of God's creation. God, in his Cosmic

Sacrifice, creates man - a creation par excellence. The smoke and vapours of the *havan* are also beneficial to man as they act as germicides and purifiers.

The appeal in the second *mantra*, for man to 'keep this fire permanently alight', urges man to continue the noble work of God, to maintain the rhythm of the universe and so ensure the continuance of life.

The next step in the oblation phase involves the offering of *ghee* into the fire. Not all the participants offer *ghee*, only the head of the household makes this offering. *Ghee* is offered five times. The same *mantra* is chanted before each offering is made.

*Om ayanta idhma atma jatavedastenedhyaswa
vardhaswa chedda vardhya chasmanprajaya
pashubhirbrahma varchasenandyena
samedhaya swaha. Idamagnaye jatavedase
idam na mama.*

This *mantra* is directed to the growing fire in the *kund*:

O fire! the illuminator of all things, this characteristic of burning that gives cause to heat and light is the property of your existence. You become manifest by these. Become powerful and shine brightly and give lustre to other things as well. O fire! bless us with good children, useful animals, light of knowledge, things of nourishment and other things beneficial to us. I am saying this with a firm conviction. This offering is to the fire that gives life to all things. It is not for me. ³⁸

The fire, at this point, becomes a metaphor. Life is seen in terms of the fire's ability to grow by consuming fuel. As the fire grows, its characteristic of producing light and heat is regarded as being beneficial to man and nature since without light and heat there can be no life. With this realization, the participants in the ritual pay homage to the fire and make requests of the fire. The participants do not regard the fire as a sort of god, but rather as a gift from God. By making requests of the fire, the participants are directing their prayer to God via the medium of His gift.

Five requests are made in this *mantra*: 'good children, useful animals, light of knowledge, things of nourishment and other things beneficial to us.' This accounts for the five fold repetition of the *mantra* and the action of offering the *ghee*.

The next step of the ritual involves the use of water. It is probable that during the Vedic period of Indian history, water was used as a coolant and to keep the fire within its boundaries. Mr S. Rambharos, a retired school principal and Hindu scholar who conducts the *Havan* at the Singh household, informed me that the *Vedic Havan* was a communal ritual which required a large fire pit or *kund*. This made it necessary for drains to be constructed along the perimeters of the

pit. Once the fire became too large, water was released into the drains to keep the fire within its perimeters and to cool the participants surrounding the fire pit. This activity has now become a formalized part of the ritual. Water is sprinkled along the different edges of the *kund* by the head of the household. The *mantras* that are chanted while this action takes place allude to the possibility that the fire might get out of control and disrupt the proceedings. The first *mantra* that is chanted while the eastern edge of the *kund* is sprinkled with water states:

Om aditenumanyaswa
 May the good work and may the performance of yajnas be continued without any hindrances. May all cooperate with unanimity in its fulfilment.³⁹

When this *mantra* is chanted, it is hoped that the proceedings would not be interrupted in any way. The threat of a fire getting out of control is likened to the passions and emotions of man which, when out of control, are destructive. For the *havan* to be successful it is important for all participants to be in control and to cooperate in a spirit of unity and harmony. The water, at this point, becomes symbolic of temperate forces which are able to bring calm to any chaotic situation. As a coolant water, is able to lower temperatures and as a binding agent, water has the ability to unite objects which have different properties.

The second *mantra*, which is chanted while the western perimeter of the *kund* is being sprinkled with water, asks for the full co-operation and approval of all participants. When the northern edge of the *kund* is being sprinkled with water, the *mantra* which is chanted asks the participants to enter into the proceedings with intelligence. Finally water is sprinkled around the entire *kund* in a single movement. The *mantra* that accompanies this action requests God to grant the participants knowledge which would make them temperate and considerate in both action and speech. In this spirit of co-operation, unity and harmony, the participants enter the next phase of the ritual.

All the participants seated around the *kund*, except the head of the household, make offerings of samagree into the sacred fire (figure 5D). The head of the household continues to make offerings of *ghee*. Each offering is preceded by the chanting of a *mantra* which ends with the word *swaha*. This acts as an indication to the participants to make their offering. *Swaha* means a firm conviction. The participants are stating that their actions and pronouncements are sincere and are executed with a firm belief in the power of God.

All the *mantras* deal with God's ability to maintain the harmony of the universe with His healing and regenerative powers. This is evident in the following *mantra*

in which homage is paid to four aspects of God which are personified in the *Vedas*.

Om agnaye swaha. Idamagnaye idam na mama
Om somaya swaha. Idam somaye idam na mama
Om praja pataye swaha. Idam prajapataye idam
na mama
Om indraya swaha. Idamindraya idam na mama.

In this mantra the offerings are directed to Agni, Soma, Prajapati and Indra. Agni is the fire who exists in the heavens as the sun, in the earth's atmosphere as lightning, and on earth, it is the fire. In all these forms, Agni plays a vital role in man's life. By paying homage to him, the participants are expressing the hope that the seasonal changes would be maintained and so ensure a good harvest. In a similar manner, Indra, the *Vedic* god of war and rain, is able to bring peace and prosperity to man by going into battle against the forces of evil and destruction. As the rain god, it is Indra's responsibility to make sure that water is always available to man. This is accomplished when Indra pierces the clouds with his weapon, the thunderbolt, to release the waters. Prajapati is lord of all creatures and of fertility. By paying homage to this aspect of God, the participant is again willing God to make his life prosperous. Soma is an intoxicating juice which is obtained from a sacred plant. Soma, the god, is a personification of this juice which has the ability to heal all wounds and cure all illnesses. By

making offerings to these aspects of God, the participants are expressing their desire for a useful life which is only possible if one is prosperous and free from ailments.

In another *mantra*, the sun, as the source of light, is again deemed to be the sustainer of life on earth. But in this instance the sun is a metaphor for the power of God.

Om suryo jyotiryotih suryah swaha
Om suryo varcho jyotirvarchah swaha
Om jyotih surya suryojyotih swaha
Om sajurdevena savitra sajurushasendravatya
jushanah suryo vetu swaha

In attempting to translate this *mantra* Vedalankar concedes that Surya is the sun but he also adds that in a spiritual sense Surya is "The one who is present in every being, is self-effulgent, who illuminates all things in the universe and who is the supporter of all life." Surya is *Parmatma* or the Supreme Soul who creates, sustains and then absorbs all that is created.⁴⁰ Vedalankar's translation attempts to crystallise the spiritual essence of this *mantra* by drawing from the basic tenets of Hindu philosophy:

The luminous sun illuminated by the
 self-effulgent *Parmatma*
 The shining power of the sun kept
 alive by the power of the Lord
 The light of the self-effulgent Lord
 keeps alight the light of my soul.
 I offer all my actions unto the lord

who is the bestower of light to the moving universe; all that I do is for the Lord.⁴¹

Throughout this phase of the ritual, light is used as an image to reinforce the doctrines of Hinduism. Another *mantra* states that the fire within the *kund* "is kept alight by the light of the lord." This *mantra* goes on to draw a parallel with man by stating that man's soul "which is enveloped in darkness gets liberation with light of divine knowledge." The doctrine of *moksha*, which holds that liberation from material bondage is only attained with God-realization, is dealt with directly in this *mantra*. The participants anticipate their attainment of *moksha* in a further *mantra* which states: "I surrender my actions to God, the giver of life who sustains and controls the life, force by heat and light." The *havan*, here, is regarded as a means of attaining spiritual enlightenment which would ensure *moksha*.⁴²

The offering of *samagree* and *ghee* into the sacred fire is brought to an end with a *mantra* which expresses the hope that the *havan* is successfully completed. When this *mantra* is chanted, the participants make sure that all the remaining *samagree* is used. At this point all observers (those who did not make offerings during the earlier stages of the ritual) are requested to make their offering of *samagree* into the *kund* as well.

The *mantra* is repeated three times and all those present make three offerings of *samagree*. Once this has been completed, the residual *ghee* is poured into the fire by the head of the household. This action is performed while the following *mantra* is chanted:

O devotee, the performer of *yajna*,
 may the Lord who is the guardian of
 all, father (the creator of all),
 purest of pure, make you pure by his
 bounteous blessings; make you happy;
 grant you success in your noble
 actions and bring this action of
 yours to a successful ending.⁴³

Vedalankar states that the significance of this *mantra* is that the performer requests God's assistance on his (the performer's) journey towards *moksha*. Once *moksha* has been attained, the individual soul is assured eternal bliss and peace. This goal of Hinduism is experienced in a small measure by the participants of the *havan* when they chant a hymn to peace at the end of the ritual.

*Om Dyauh shanti antarikshagwam
 shanti pritivi shanti rapah shanti-
 roshdhaya shantih.*

*Vanaspatayah shantih vishwedevah
 shanti bramah shantih sarvagwam
 shantih shantireva shantih sa ma
 shantiredhi.*

Om Shantih Shantih Shantih.

There is peace in the heavenly region; there is peace in the atmosphere; peace reigns on the earth; there is coolness in the water; the medicinal herbs are healing; the plants are peace giving; there is harmony in the

celestial objects; there is
perfection in eternal knowledge;
everything in the universe is
peaceful; peace pervades everywhere.
May that peace come to me.
May there be peace, peace, peace!⁴⁴

Once this hymn has been chanted, the participants, with their eyes closed, observe a period of silence. The crackling fire is the only sound that can be heard during this period. The smoke and vapour which rise from the fire begin to spread throughout the house. There is a transformation in the participants as well. Throughout the ritual the participants have been made aware of the nature of God and His role in creation. The participants realize the goal of their existence and how this might be achieved. With this realization the participants open their eyes and greet everyone present with the salutation, 'Namaste' which literally means, 'I bow down to you.'

CHAPTER FOUR NOTES

1. Pandit Nardev Vedalankar, "Purport of the Yajna", paper prepared for Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Durban, n.d.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Sarma, Hinduism Through the Ages, p.3.
4. *Ibid.*, p.5.
5. *Ibid.*, p.6.
6. *Ibid.*, p.10.
7. *Ibid.*, p.92.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Jeanine Miller, The Vision of Cosmic Order in the Vedas, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, p.204.
10. Lee Mée, Hymns from the Rig Veda, p.50.
11. Panikkar, The Vedic Experience, p.347.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Hindu scholars, like D.S. Sarma, interpret Purusha (the Primal Being) as God.
14. These verses were translated by Mrs M Singh.
15. Panikkar, The Vedic Experience, p.354.
16. Miller, The Vision of Cosmic Order in the Vedas, p.206.
17. Panikkar, The Vedic Experience, p.361.
18. Vedalankar, Essential Teachings of Hinduism, p.82.
19. Devi Chand, trans., Yajur Veda, Hoshiapur, India: By the Author, 1959, pp.244-245.
20. Miller, The Vision of Cosmic Order in the Vedas, p.213.
21. Cited by Panikkar, The Vedic Experience, p.36.
22. A sacred verse.

23. Not all the *mantras* used in the ritual, will be transcribed in this description since the meaning of many *mantras* tend to overlap. The *mantras*, in Sanskrit, are to be found in the following book:
Aryan Prayer, Durban, Veda Niketan South Africa, n.d.
24. Aum is pronounced *Orm*.
25. Vedalankar, Essential Teachings of Hinduism, p.23.
26. Panikkar, The Vedic Experience, p.38.
27. Vedalankar, Essential Teachings of Hinduism, p.37.
28. *Ibid*.
29. Panikkar, The Vedic Experience, p.43.
30. Pandit Nardev Vedalankar, "Exposition of Agnihotra (Havan) Mantras", paper prepared for Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, Durban, n.d.
31. *Ibid*.
32. *Ibid*.
33. *Ibid*.
34. *Ibid*.
35. Satyakam Varma, Vedic Studies, New Delhi, Bharatiya Prakashan, 1984, p.12.
36. *Ibid*.
37. Vedalankar, "Exposition of Agnihotra (Havan) Mantras".
38. *Ibid*.
39. *Ibid*.
40. *Ibid*.
41. *Ibid*.
42. *Ibid*.
43. *Ibid*.
44. Aryan Prayer, p.41.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FIRE-WALKING FESTIVAL

The fire-walking festival is a temple based celebration of God's *Sakti* or energy which is personified in female form. In this festival the metaphor of fire is used to represent God's energy which has the ability to create and to destroy. In observing this festival, participants pray for the annihilation of their baser animalistic qualities, vices and impurities so that a new, spiritually enriched self might evolve. Fire is regarded by Hindus as a means of spiritually cleansing oneself and as such, walking across a pit of burning embers becomes a *tapas* or austerity which lifts the individual from the material or physical plane onto the more exalted spiritual plane.

The ability to walk across a fire pit and come out unscathed is a sign of God's protection over those who follow the path of *Dharma*. Many participants stated that they observed this festival as a result of a vow in which a pledge is made to God so that His help might be obtained to alleviate some worldly distress. This, in most instances was an illness that could not be cured medically. *Sakti* is the protective mother to whom devotees pledge their faith and in the fire walking festival, devotees enact their faith.

Many of the rituals involved in this festival are directed towards good health and the well being of the devotee. The doctrines of artha and kama imply that only if one is comfortable in a physical or material sense is one able to direct one's being towards spiritual growth. In making and carrying out vows, the Hindu seeks harmony in his material existence so that physical distress would not become a hindrance to achieving spiritual upliftment. Kuper observes that:

Some illnesses are superficially explicable by material causes, but ultimately, illness, like all events in life, are the result of one's own deeds (karma) in the wider scheme of the universe. An illness therefore has an element of guilt, which can be expiated by religious devotions: vows, visits to the temple, frequent pooja, acts of self denial and penance.¹

Fire walking becomes one such act or deed which could ultimately deliver one from the bondage of one's *karma*.

THE MYTHOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF THE FESTIVAL

Although the festival is dedicated to Sakti or Devi, its essential features are derived from the epic *The Mahabharata* with its heroine, Draupadi, being regarded as an incarnation of Sakti.² In this epic, Draupadi is born to Drupada, the King of the Panchalas, who, in his

youth, was taught the skills of weaponry by a *rishi*. Also being tutored by this *rishi* was a *brahmin* youth, Drona. Draupada and Drona establish a very close relationship and Drupada offers to share his kingdom with Drona. When their student days end, the friends depart. Drupada returns to rule his kingdom while Drona marries and lives in extreme poverty. Being unable to provide for his family, Drona decides to seek help from his friend, Drupada, who, not only spurns Drona, but also mocks him by stating that unequals could never be friends. Drona is angered and resolves to seek revenge.

Drona is soon engaged by Dhritarastra, the father of the Kaurava brothers and guardian to the Pandava brothers, to tutor his charges in military skills. At the end of their tutelage, Drona asks for his guru's fee to be paid in the form of King Drupada's capture. Arjuna, Drona's favourite student, accomplishes this feat. Drona claims half of Drupada's kingdom so that they could continue their friendship as equals. Drupada departs crest-fallen, but spurred on by an intense hatred for Drona. Knowing that he would be unable to kill Drona, Drupada resorts to divine help. With the aid of two sages, he performs the fire sacrifice and prays for a son, who would destroy Drona, and a daughter, who would marry Arjuna. Draupada not only admires the skill displayed by Arjuna, but he also believes that Drona would not retaliate against

Arjuna's father-in-law. Out of this fire a son is born, and a daughter, Draupadi, is also born. Because of her skin colour, she is called Krishna, which means dark skinned.

Arjuna wins Draupadi's hand in marriage at an archery contest especially arranged for this purpose. Because of a promise made to their mother, to share everything they possessed, Draupadi is married to all five of the Pandava brothers. This is not meant as an excuse for polyandry; but as a test of *dharma* which the five brothers are supposed to embody. The thought of his daughter being married to five men distresses Draupada but he is consoled when he is told that Shiva had promised Draupadi, in a previous life, five husbands since she had asked him for a husband who possessed all the virtues.

The rivalry between the Pandavas and the Kauravas soon results in a game of dice played by the eldest brothers of both families: Yudhisthira of the Pandavas and Duryodhana of the Kauravas. | Yudhisthira loses all his possessions including the Pandava share of the kingdom, his brothers, himself and finally their wife, Draupadi. Duryodhana summons Dussasana to bring Draupadi to appear before the court. Despite her pleas that she was menstruating and had just one piece of clothing, Dussasana drags her by the hair into the court where

she is grossly insulted for being married to five men. Her final humiliation is Duryodhana's order that she be disrobed. Unable to bear the indignity of this, Draupadi, in a trance-like state, prays to Krishna for help. When Dussasana begins to disrobe Draupadi, he finds that her clothing has no end - as soon as one garment is pulled off, another appears in its place. The floor is soon littered with clothing and Dussasana is too tired to continue. In her anger at having to bear these insults, Draupadi takes on the appearance of the goddess, Durga. Draupadi vows never to tie up her hair until it has been annointed with Dussasana and Duryodhana's blood. At this point, the sound of a jackal is heard issuing from the palace temple. Regarding this as an ill omen, King Dhritarashtra, the father of the Kaurava brothers, tries to make amends for his sons' transgressions. He asks Draupadi for mercy and promises to fulfil any request she might have. Draupadi first asks for the freedom of Yudhishthira. Assuming this to be a minor request, Dhritarashtra grants Draupadi a further boon. This time she requests the freedom of the remaining four brothers. When Draupadi refuses the third boon which would mean her freedom, Dhritarashtra is moved by her selflessness and sets all the Pandavas free. Duryodhana rejects his father's fears and harbouring his own fears about the dangers of the Pandavas being free, he challenges Yudhishthira to one more game of dice in

which the loser would dwell in exile in the forests for twelve years and in the thirteenth year, live unrecognised in a city. Yudhisthira, not wishing to be obligated to the Kauravas for his family's freedom, accepts the challenge and loses. The Pandavas, with Draupadi, her hair undone and in blood stained clothes, leave the city.

While in exile, the Pandavas have many adventures and encounters which enlarge their alliances and following. In the thirteenth year, they send a message to Duryodhana in which they request peace and an equal division of the kingdom. Assuming the Pandava request for peace to be a sign of weakness, Duryodhana refuses and war is declared. The battle is fought for eighteen days on the fields of Kurukshetra and ends with the defeat and death of the Kauravas. One of the Pandava brothers, Bhima, kills both Duryodhana and Dussasana, enabling Draupadi to fulfil her vow. Yudhisthira is installed as king and he rules his kingdom wisely. Harmony and peace are restored. *The Mahabharata* ends with the abdication of Yudhisthira and with his journey, accompanied by his brothers and Draupadi, to Mount Meru (Indra's heaven) and death.

As a result of the circumstances surrounding her birth and her role in the Pandava victory, Draupadi has come to be defined as the Goddess of Fire and is considered

to be an incarnation of Shiva's *Sakti*. Although the Pandava brothers do physical battle against the Kauravas, it is Draupadi's energy which ultimately leads to the Pandava victory. This energy may be witnessed at the climax of the epic. The disrobing incident moves the Pandavas to action since it is at this point that they vow to rid the kingdom of the amoral Kauravas and so avenge Draupadi's honour. It is also Draupadi who is responsible for freeing the Pandava brothers (after their loss in the game of dice) from subjugation to the Kauravas. By securing their freedom, she makes it possible for the Pandavas to go into battle against the Kauravas and ultimately reinstate *dharma* in their kingdom. For many Hindus this triumph of *dharma* over *adharma* (immorality) is Draupadi's victory. Hence, she is regarded as an extension of Sakti or Devi who, like Shiva, is the destroyer, responsible for the removal of immorality and evil and the reinstatement of harmony, peace and *dharma*. In attempting to attain this goal, Sakti assumes various guises - some are benevolent, while others are terrifying.

In the fire-walking festival, the many guises of Sakti are worshipped. She is worshipped as the merciful Gengammen and Mariammen,³ and as the fearsome and intimidating Durga. Gengammen, who represents God's life giving energy, has strong associations with the

River Ganges. Mariammen, who is sometimes referred to as the Mother of Smallpox, is the compassionate healer of dreaded diseases. Durga is the terrifying slayer of demons whose actions threaten the harmony of the universe. Her methods of annihilating demons are horrific and include dismemberment, after which she drinks the blood of her victims. Images of Durga usually portray her as a beautiful woman in a red sari. In her ten arms she carries various weapons including a trident, a knife, a rope and a long spear. In keeping with her ferocity in dealing with demons, Durga's vehicle is a lion.

Draupadi is considered a composite image of these various guises of the multi-faceted Sakti. She may be tender, generous and compassionate but she is also relentless and ruthless in her dealings with those who transgress the path of *dharma*. In the fire walking festival devotees enact Draupadi's role in *The Mahabharata*. By identifying with Draupadi, devotees attempt to purge themselves of all imperfections and so ensure that their souls will attain eternal bliss.

THE FESTIVAL OBSERVED

The description of the festival is based on observations at the Umbilo Temple situated in Bellair

Road, Cato Manor, Durban. The temple compound comprises two shrines: one dedicated to Shiva and the other to Sakti, in her guise as Draupadi. The latter shrine, which forms the focus of the Fire Walking Festival, is called the Umbilo Shree Draupadiamman Alayam and is, reputedly, the only shrine in South Africa dedicated to Draupadi.

THE TEMPLE AND THE ORGANIZATION OF SPACE

When one enters the temple grounds, the most prominent feature one notices is the area containing the fire pit. The pit is rectangular in shape and is approximately ten metres long. At the head of the fire pit is a little altar which, on the day of the festival, is used to hold the image of Sakti. The fire pit is fenced off and once it has been consecrated, it becomes sacred and only participating devotees, who are spiritually and physically clean, are allowed within this area. A concrete path, colourfully decorated with geometric patterns, links the fire pit to a flight of stairs which lead to the Sakti shrine situated on a hill. In the courtyard of the shrine are two altars: one containing the flag pole and the other, the *Balipeedam*. On the sides of the altar containing the flag pole are relief images of a lion's head, Sakti's vehicle. The facade of the shrine and its roof contain

many *murtis* of the various incarnations of Sakti. Prominently placed, on either side of the door, are images of Sarasvathi and Lutchmi, while the central position on the roof, is occupied by Draupadi. Within the shrine is a large empty space used to seat devotees and for the performance of certain rituals (to be described later). The wall facing the door contains the sanctum, within which are housed images of Ganesha, Gengammen, Sakti and Mariammen. On either side of the opening to the inner sanctum are two platforms. The platform to the right of the inner sanctum contains movable images of Gengammen, Sakti and Mariammen. During festivals dedicated to these deities the images are carried by devotees around the temple. On the day of the fire walking festival, the image of Sakti is first placed in the courtyard of the shrine and is finally carried to the fire pit where it is placed on the altar. The platform to the left of the sanctum contains lamps, water pots, tridents and other objects to be used in rituals connected with the festival.

THE PHASES OF THE FESTIVAL

Many participants regard the festival as a celebration of the eighteen day battle at Kurukshetra, in which Draupadi and the Pandava brothers emerged as victors over the forces of *adharma*. Like the battle, the

festival is observed over a period of eighteen days when symbolic religious rituals are performed to aid participants in recalling the Pandava victory and the triumph of *dharma*. During this period, devotees aspire to emulate the morality and code of conduct adopted by the heroes of *The Mahabharata*. This is achieved by practising certain austerities or *tapas* which act as a means of spiritual cleansing and growth. These austerities include abstinence from meat and impure foods, smoking, alcohol and sex. The devotees also attempt to rid themselves of their ego and, in humility, submit themselves to the power of God. Ideally all devotees are supposed to live and practise their austerities at the temple. In the South African context, this is not possible, mainly for economic reasons and because of the pressures of the western lifestyle adopted by Indians in this country.

The festival comprises a number of rituals which aid the devotees in achieving their aspirations. The preparatory or purificatory phase of the festival is observed during the initial seventeen day period during which time a daily ritual called the *Kalsam Prayer* is performed each evening at six o'clock. Midway through this period, in the evening of the ninth day, a flag, bearing the figure of a lion (Sakti's vehicle), is hoisted. During this phase the focus is on the individual participants while in the second phase,

which begins in the evening of the seventeenth day (the day before the fire walking procession) and continues into the morning of the eighteenth day, the focus is on the preparation of the temple, the *murtis* and the fire-pit. The highlights of this phase is the *Abishegam* and the consecration of the fire-pit. The *Abishegam* ritual, which begins at midnight, involves the ceremonial bathing of the *murtis* representing Sakti. After the consecration of the fire pit on the morning of the eighteenth day, all participants gather at a designated spot to prepare for the final phase of the festival, the procession to the fire pit. The festival is brought to an end with the dehoisting of the flag. An interesting feature of the seventeenth night is the performance of a folk theatrical form called *Therukoothu*. The *Therukoothu* serves as a form of relevant entertainment for those devotees who keep an all night vigil at the temple.

THE KALSAM PRAYER

The focus of this nightly prayer is a decorated, brass water pot called the *Kalsam*. A coconut, with its tuft pointing upwards, covers the opening of the pot where five mango leaves have been arranged in a circle. A garland of marigolds is draped over this arrangement. The *Kalsam* is placed in the middle of a large stainless

steel tray and is flanked by an image of Ganesha, to its right, and a clay lamp, to its left. This tray is placed on the floor, below the platform to the left of the inner sanctum.

Since this prayer forms the major portion of the first phase of the festival, it is essentially purificatory and involves the spiritual cleansing of the participants. During this phase, participants attempt to shed their egos and all other egocentric characteristics, such as jealousy and anger. It is for this reason that prayers, directed to Ganesha, become important. As the remover of obstacles and the epitome of humility, he is the ideal representation of the state of being to which all devotees aspire. The *Kalsam*, which features a coconut very prominently, is symbolic of Ganesha. Just as the coconut, which contains a sweet and pure fruit within a hard, coarse and vulgar exterior, has to be broken to reveal its untainted interior, in a similar manner, devotees attempt to shed the crude and superficial layers of their personality so that their inner being would be revealed. The coconut metaphor is sustained throughout this prayer which reaches a climax when several coconuts are ritualistically broken and the fruit, offered to Sakti.

Devotees who arrive for the evening prayer, first walk around the shrine three times, pay their respects to the flag pole and *Balipeedam*, and then proceed into the shrine where they seat themselves on the floor or on the few benches that are arranged along the walls. The prayer commences with the lighting of the lamps, both clay and brass, which are arranged on the platforms within and on either side of the inner sanctum. While the lamps are being lit, the priest rings a bell and sprinkles water around the *murtis* and lamps. The lighting of the lamps and the ringing of the bell, not only summon the devotees to direct their attention towards God, but also signify that God is present within the shrine. The priest then calls all devotees who will be walking across or around the fire pit to seat themselves in front of the tray containing the *Kalsam*. These devotees make offerings of marigold petals to the image of Ganesha and then to the *Kalsam*. The priest then performs the *arti* with a hand-held lamp around these symbols. The flower offerings is symbolic, not only of the shedding of one's ego, but also of one's complete submission to God. The devotee recognises the power of God and accepts the belief that the beauty of God's creation is ultimately a part of Him. Therefore, the ego is artificial and has no place in the spiritual world.

The *havan*, which follows this ritual, serves as a means of uniting the devotees and creating an atmosphere of harmony and goodwill. It is also symbolic of the sacrifice of ego and is a logical sequel to the preceding ritual. The *havan* is performed in the middle of the floor. The devotees move from the *Kalsam* and arrange themselves in a circle around the *Havan kund*. The observers form a semi-circle around this inner group and when the final offering of samagree is being made, these observers step forward and make their offerings as well. Once this has been completed a choir group begins singing *bhajans* or sacred hymns dedicated to the various deities. The priest takes the *Kalsam* and whilst ringing a bell, moves out of the shrine towards the fire pit. He is followed by other devotees who chant the refrain '*Goinda, Goinda*', all the way to the fire pit.⁴

At the fire pit camphor cubes are ignited at the altar, the four corners of the pit and in the middle of the pit. The priest and devotees prostrate themselves before the ignited camphor in the middle of the pit, after which, the procession, led by the priest, makes its way back to the temple. Before entering the temple, further camphor cubes are lit at the four-corners of the temple by the priest. On entering the temple, the priest replaces the *Kalsam* on the tray below the left platform. This journey to the fire pit serves a twofold

purpose. Firstly, it is significant of the divesting of one's ego, and secondly, it forms part of the process of consecrating the fire pit which is completed in the morning of the final day of the festival.

The final destruction of the ego is symbolically presented in the next stage of this ritual which begins when the priest brings out a coconut from the inner sanctum. Devotees, in a gesture of surrender, make offerings of coins, water and flower petals to this coconut which the priest takes out to the *Balipeedam*, where he performs the *arti* with it. Once the coconut is brought back to the inner sanctum, the congregation rises. After waving incense sticks and a lamp around the *murtis* in the sanctum, the priest performs the *arti* with the coconut around these *murtis*. The coconut is then broken into two pieces which are placed on either side of a tray containing fruit offerings. Fruit offerings, on trays, are placed before each of the *murtis* of Sakti inside the sanctum, while a further tray is placed on the left platform outside the sanctum. In all, four coconuts are broken and placed in each of these trays. The prayer finally ends with the blowing of the conch shell and the ringing of a hand-held bell after which the *arti* is performed by the priest, with a lamp.

THE THERUKOOTHU

The handbill, issued by the temple to announce and advertise the Fire Walking Festival, makes the following proclamation:

A grand all night dance. An episode from the 'Mahabharata'. Eighteen day battle will be enacted, followed by fulfilment of a queen's vow at day break.⁵

The 'grand all night dance' is a reference to the *Therukoothu* performance which takes place during the night preceding the fire walking procession. The performance is held for two reasons:

1. It serves as a means of explaining the significance of the fire walking festival.
2. It offers a means of meditation and contemplation for those devotees who keep an all night vigil at the temple.

Therukoothu, a form of folk theatre which originated in Tamilnad, in the south of India, literally means 'street play'.⁶ This tradition, transported from India by the early Indian settlers to Natal, is fast becoming a dying art form in this country. The average age of the troupe, which performs at the Umbilo Temple, is sixty, with one performer claiming to be eighty-two

years old. Due to the age of the performers, much of the vigour and energy, which characterises this theatrical tradition and earned it the colloquial name 'Six foot dancing' (a reference to the tumbles, somersaults and leaps which the performers indulge in), is omitted.

The performance, based on the main plot of *The Mahabharata*, is episodic and traces the events which lead to Draupadi's humiliation, her vow, and her final victory after fulfilling the vow. The script alternates between song and spoken dialogue, much of which is improvised and tends to comic interludes. Although the improvised dialogue is for the most part in Tamil, the performers sometimes break into English or intersperse the Tamil dialogue with English phrases. The dialogue may, at times, become vulgar especially when reference is made to Krishna. The performers refer to his exploits with the *gopis* and play up the sexual implications of Krishna's encounter. The language, in an attempt to add humour, becomes crude and it is partially for this reason that females are not allowed to take part in a *Therukoothu* performance although they are allowed to watch.

Being a form of street theatre, *Therukoothu* performances are able to adapt to any playing space. At the Umbilo Temple, the performance takes place in a

large marquee which is erected away from the temple and the fire-pit. Inside the tent a floor space, at one end, is covered with a sheet of canvas to denote the playing space. The rest of the tent is filled with chairs for the audience, facing the stage. Along the back wall of the tent, behind the stage, a row of chairs are arranged for the musicians and for actors who are not required in a particular scene.

The performance opens with an invocation to the various deities. The *Kattiakaran*, which literally means 'story teller', comes forward and addresses the audience directly about the play to be performed. The *Kattiakaran* acts as a narrator who may introduce characters, question them about their motives and generally inform the audience about time and place. He is also the comedian and much of the humour and improvization occurs when the *Kattiakaran* interacts with actors playing other characters. When each character is being introduced, a cotton sheet is held by two stage hands, so that only the head and feet of that character is visible to the audience as he sings his introduction. The introduction is sung in the third person. Once the sheet has been removed, the performer sings and speaks in the first person.

The musicians seated at the back provide the musical accompaniment and act as a chorus. They may provide a

refrain to a song, or question characters and even provide answers if a character happens to question the audience. The musicians also act as stage hands and in full view of the audience, they may step forward to adjust an actor's costume or even offer water to an actor whose voice has become hoarse.

During the performance, no attempt is made to maintain any theatrical illusion. After having completed his scene an actor may join the musicians, remove his head gear and play a musical instrument. The performance may stop for a few minutes as adjustments to costumes are made or actors, who need to make an entry, are called. If the wait is too long, the *Kattiakaran* may step forward and entertain the audience by singing a comic song or engaging another actor, on stage, in a comic dialogue. In one instance, at the performance I observed, when an actor's head gear had to be fetched from a building at the rear of the tent, the *Kattiakaran* used the opportunity to explain to the audience that this was the first time he was playing the role, stepping in, in true theatrical tradition, at the last minute to replace an actor who had fallen ill and he asked to be excused and forgiven if his performance was not up to standard.

Commenting on the costumes and make-up used in *Therukoothu*, Gargi states that *Therukoothu* "has a family

resemblance to Kathakali. But it does not have the artistic splendor of the classical form."7 This was evident in the costumes of the troupe that performed at the Umbilo Temple (figure 6A & B). These costumes, which attempt to depict the garb of Indian royalty, were improvised, used a colourful mixture of odd pieces of cloth and richly embroidered saris which had been draped so that they looked like dhotis or Indian jackets. These were worn over loose pants made of silk or other shiny material, to give an appearance of richness. A few actors used track pants instead. One performer stated that in earlier years, when this form of entertainment was popular at functions at homes and at temples, special *Therukoothu* costumes were imported from India. Because of the decline in interest, and hence a lack of funds, this practice was stopped. Odd pieces of these imported costumes, which are still in a good condition, are used by performers and are augmented by other bits of improvised costume which included western clothing such as shirts. The costume worn by the performer playing the *Kattiakaran*, displayed an interesting mixture of eastern and western costume. His costume consisted of a beige beret, a vest with a leopard skin print and a pair of track pants over which he wore a flared, knee-length chiffon skirt (figure 5A).

Figure 6 : ACTIVITIES PRECEDING THE FIRE-WALKING PROCESSION



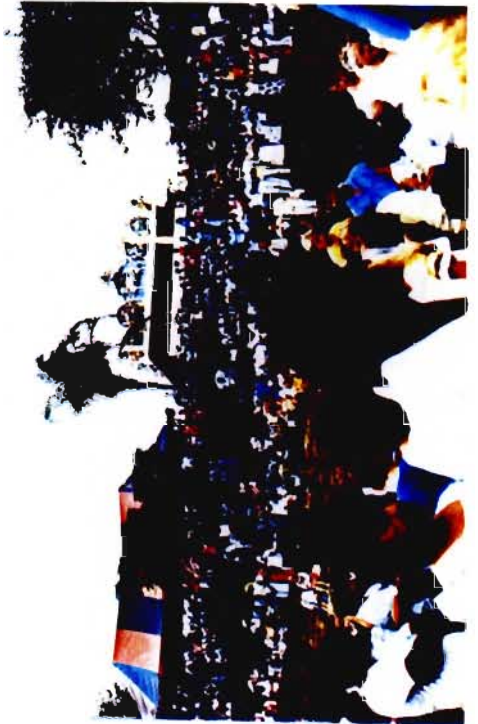
B



D



A



C

Perhaps the most striking features of the costumes were the headgear and shoulder decorations (figure 5B). The headgear consisted of a tall cone-shaped crown made of wood and was worn by all male characters who depicted royalty. The shoulder decoration was a wooden wing-like structure which, like the crown, was colourfully painted. The female characters and deities used smaller tiara-like crowns which were painted gold and were decorated with coloured glass beads. The actors' faces were painted in different colours to indicate their characters. The actors playing evil characters, such as Duryodhana and Dussasana would have red or pink faces, while the more virtuous characters had white faces. Actors playing deities painted their faces green or blue.

The audience, seated in rows facing the stage, did not stay for the entire performance. They came in at any time, especially during breaks in the rituals being conducted at the temple, and they left at any time. During the early stages of the performance, there was quite a large crowd seated in the tent, but as the evening progressed the numbers began to dwindle and after midnight just a handful of devotees, who were keeping an all-night vigil, remained to watch the completion of the performance.

THE ABISHEGAM

At midnight, on the evening preceding the fire walking procession, the ritual bathing of the *murtis*, representing the Divine Mother, takes place. The *abishegam* is an intensely symbolic ritual in which the deities are thanked for the bounty they have provided to sustain life on earth. In this ritual devotees show their gratitude by bathing *murtis* with essential foods such as rice powder, milk, curd, ghee, honey, mixed fruit, which has been mashed, and boiled rice. Beauty aids, like tumeric, which has skin cleansing properties and is widely used in Indian skin preparations, are also used in the ritual bath.

Before the commencement of the bath, a curtain is drawn to close off the inner sanctum. The temple priest explained that this was done to give the *murtis* a certain amount of privacy while they were being undressed. This explanation reveals the attitude of devotees towards the *murtis*. The devotee treats the *murtis* as he would a real, living being; he shows the same amount of consideration, reverence and piety that he would show to someone who demands respect.

On a bench, placed to one side of the temple floor, the ingredients to be used in the bath, are arranged in a row. Observers, consisting of participants and other

interested devotees, are seated on the floor of the temple, facing the inner sanctum. At midnight the curtain to the inner sanctum is opened and the *murtis* are revealed. They are not completely undressed. To protect their modesty, a sari is wrapped around each *murti* so that they are covered from below the chest.

Devotees who would be participating in the ritual form a line and, in turn, each devotee picks up one of the ingredients, to be used in the bath, and approaches the inner sanctum. The devotee hands over the ingredient to the priest who holds it up for the congregation to see as he tells them what it is. One of the temple elders, assisting the priest, hands the devotee a bucket of water which he pours over each *murti*. The priest then gives the devotee the ingredient he had brought into the inner sanctum. Depending on the physical properties of the ingredient being used, the devotee either pours the ingredient over the *murtis* or he rubs the ingredient onto each *murti*. The devotee then applies a red dot onto the forehead of each *murti*. Once he has completed this task, the devotee performs the *arti*, using a hand-held lamp, before each image. The devotee then leaves the inner sanctum and returns to his seat in the auditorium. As a mark of respect the devotee walks backwards to his seat so that he is facing the *murtis* in the inner sanctum. This procedure is repeated until all the ingredients are used.

The observers seated on the temple floor are not detached from the action taking place within the inner sanctum. Involvement ranges from passive meditation to total identification with the deities being honoured. Observers do not appear to register any surprise when another observer, seated amongst them, gets up in a state of trance and begins to dance. At the performance of this ritual, which I observed, a woman got up, while the *murtis* were being bathed, and in a state of trance she began performing some snake-like movements and assumed the pose of a cobra by raising her hands above her head to form the cobra's hood. She then proceeded to undo her hair, so that it was allowed to flow freely, and gesticulated to another member of the congregation who gave her some tumeric which she smeared onto her face. After more gesticulations, she was given some red powder which she used to place a mark on her forehead. She then took a clay pot from the platform, to the side of the inner sanctum and placed some camphor cubes into it. These were subsequently lit by another member of the congregation. Once this had been accomplished, the woman walked amongst the congregation, who paid obeisance to her. Each member of the congregation was blessed by this lady, who placed her hand over the flames in the clay pot and on to the heads of each observer after which she smeared sacred ash (*vibuti*) onto their foreheads.

This member of the congregation identified completely with Sakti. By first performing snake-like movements, she established her relationship to Shiva. Once her hair had been loosened and her face smeared with tumeric, she began to assume the character of Sakti. The congregation recognised this and by approaching her, each member of the congregation believed that this lady was a medium through which they could reach Sakti and receive Her blessings.

At another point in the ritual a cast member of the *Therukoothu* troupe, accompanied by musicians, entered the temple. He sang a song in front of the sanctum and brandished the club he was carrying. This actor played Bhima, one of the Pandava brothers, and his song was about his pledge to Draupadi, to seek revenge on her behalf by breaking Duryodhana's thigh. After the song, the actor and his musicians, left the temple. Before returning to the tent where the *Therukoothu* performance was taking place, this group circumambulated the temple and lit camphor cubes at its corners. This intrusion into the *abishegam* ritual, is meant to remind devotees that their walking over hot embers the next day, is also a pledge to Sakti. The devotees are, like Bhima, performing a selfless act to demonstrate the total surrender of their entire being to the service of the Divine Mother.

Once the bathing of the *murtis* has been completed, the curtain to the inner sanctum is drawn once again. A few ladies, who have ironed the saris and chosen the jewellery that would be used to adorn the *murtis*, help the priest to dress the *murtis* behind the closed curtain. At this point most devotees leave the temple and return home. A few devotees, together with the priest and temple elders, keep an all night vigil at the temple.

THE CONSECRATION OF THE FIRE PIT

The minor consecration rites which were performed during the entire seventeen day period, preceding the fire walking procession, culminate on the morning of the last day of the festival when the fire pit is finally sanctified. The area between the main entrance to the temple and the flag pole is used for the performance of rituals on this day as a large crowd of devotees is expected at the temple. The movable *murti* of Sakti is placed on an altar against a wall of the temple, to the left of the main entrance. Before the commencement of the rituals, a sarie is used to conceal the *murti*. Two large brass pots are placed on either side of the flag pole into which devotees, who arrive at the temple, deposit their donations to the temple fund. A trident or *vel* is placed beside the altar

containing the *Balipeedam*. Lime is pieced onto the spokes of the trident, which is draped with a rope and a garland of syringa leaves.⁸ The trident, which has strong associations with Shiva, is also a weapon used by Sakti. Her use of this weapon to purify and annihilate man's demonic qualities, is emphasised by the use of lime, syringa leaves and the rope. Because of their cleansing and purificatory properties, both lime and syringa leaves are used extensively for medicinal purposes by Indians and in this festival they are used extensively as symbols of purity.

The ritual commences with the unveiling of the *murti* of Sakti which occurs when the priest gets into a trance-like state. Once the saries, covering the *murtis* have been removed, the priest splits a lime into four pieces which he throws in the four directions, symbolising the cleansing of the environment with the aid of Sakti's purificatory powers. This is strengthened by a chant, led by a temple elder, that elicits a choral response from the observers present:

Elder	:	<i>Sakti ma ki</i>
Observers	:	<i>Jai</i>
Elder	:	<i>Sakti ki</i>
Observers	:	<i>Jai</i>
Elder	:	<i>Sakti Devi ki</i>
Observers	:	<i>Jai</i>

Elder : *Sakti Mata ki*
 Observers : *Jai*

Thereafter all the observers burst into shouts of '*Goinda, Goinda*'. The choral response, '*Jai*' means 'victory'. The chant becomes both a pledge to Sakti that her devotees will follow the path of *dharma* and so ensure her victory, and it is an exhortation to Sakti to remove and annihilate all demonic forces that are impediments in the path of *dharma*. The shout of '*Goinda*' is a reference to God, the preserver, and is a plea or a form of thanks to God for sustaining life in a merciful manner.

The temple priest leads the devotees in a procession around the temple. On returning to the main entrance, the procession pays obeisance to the flag pole and to the *murti* of Sakti. The priest, with a few elders, enters the temple and pays obeisance to the *murtis* inside the temple as well. Once this has been completed, the group leaves the temple and assembles around the *havan kund* which has been placed in front of the main entrance to the temple. The *havan* is performed by this group and those devotees who would be walking across the fire pit. At the end of the *havan*, all the observers, who had formed an outer circle around the group performing the *havan*, are requested to make their offerings into the *kund*. Many devotees, as an

indication of their submission to God, circle their heads with the *samagree* before offering it into the fire. Others remove their prayer beads from around their necks and perform the *arti* with these beads, before the *havan kund*. Devotees also prostrate themselves before the *kund*. For these devotees the fire itself is sacred as it is regarded as Sakti, or God's energy, which creates, sustains and reabsorbs life.

A group of percussionists assemble outside the main entrance to the temple where they begin to play a slow, steady beat on their drums. The priest, with a few elders, enters the temple and the *Kalsam* is removed. One of the elders enters into a state of trance and the *Kalsam* is placed on his left shoulder. He then walks out of the temple, followed by the priest and temple elders. Outside the temple, the other devotees and observers join the procession which proceeds around the temple. After circumambulating the temple, the musicians lead the procession down the steps to the fire pit. Only the elder carrying the *Kalsam*, the priest and temple elders are allowed into the fenced off area containing the fire pit. This smaller procession walks around the pit and at each corner and in the centre of the pit camphor cubes are lit. When this procession arrives at the altar at the head of the fire pit, the coconut is removed from the *Kalsam* and is broken. *Syringa* leaves are then used to sprinkle the

water from the *Kalsam* around the pit. When this ritual has been completed, the rest of the procession is allowed into the fenced off area. The fire pit is circumambulated and the entire procession is led back to the temple by the musicians. At the temple the elder who had carried the *Kalsam*, has his forehead smeared with *vibhuti*. Hereafter the priest holds a lamp against his forehead. At this point the elder comes out of his trance.

The breaking of the coconut, contained in the *Kalsam*, at the fire pit is the climax of the *Kalsam* prayer which had been observed during the preceding seventeen days. This act serves as a final commitment by the devotees to shed their ego and submit themselves, in humility, to the power of Sakti by walking across the bed of fire. The water sprinkled onto the fire pit with syringa leaves is an indication of the purity of the devotees who have achieved this state by practising austerities or *tapas* during the entire eighteen day period. The water from the *Kalsam* is also meant to symbolically cleanse the fire pit of all impurities which might have been lodged there since the previous festival, a year before, when the fire pit was last used.

The procedure of carrying items from the temple to the fire pit is repeated three more times. In each instance

the object is carried by a different devotee. The second item to be carried down to the fire pit is a *murti* of Ganesha who, as remover of all obstacles is invoked so that devotees would be able to overcome any problem that might be encountered while crossing the fire pit. A trident or *vel* is the next object to be carried down to the fire pit. This represents Sakti's protective powers over her devotees.

The final procession involves the lighting of the fire at the fire pit where huge logs have been arranged to form a pyramid (figure 6D). The temple elder, who will be leading the procession across the fire pit, drapes a yellow cotton cloth around his waist like an apron. He holds up the two free ends of the apron to form a receptacle into which syringa leaves are placed. He walks out of the temple to the *havan kund* where the burning embers from the *kund* is poured over the syringa leaves. The temple elder, followed by the rest of the procession, is led by the musicians to the fire pit. A camphor cube is lit at the altar of the pit while another burning piece of camphor is dropped into the apron containing the embers from the *havan kund*. With the embers now sprouting flames, the elder moves over to the logs in the middle of the pit where he deposits the contents of the apron. The priest performs the *havan* over the logs after which devotees are allowed to walk around the pit and make offerings of sweet meats,

samagree, camphor and *ghee* into the fire. These offerings fuel the fire and aid its growth. The ritual ends with the procession returning to the temple where the remnants of ash in the apron is applied onto the foreheads of devotees.

During each of the processions from the temple to the fire pit, many devotees, in the procession, fall into a state of trance. Some begin to stamp their feet and gyrate their bodies to the rhythm of the drums. Others sway their bodies, slowly, from side to side. A few women loosen their hair and in a frenzy, they begin to rotate their shoulders and heads so that their long hair is allowed to flail the air. In this state, the devotees begin to identify with Sakti, and many proceed to bless the other devotees in the procession. Many devotees say that in this state they experience a feeling of euphoria and ecstasy. Others explained that the trance freed them, momentarily, from the bondage of their physical bodies. This new found freedom is evident in the complete abandon with which these devotees move their bodies. Most devotees do not remember what had happened while they were entranced, but once they come out of the trance, they experience a sense of calm and bliss.

THE FIRE-WALKING PROCESSION

Not all devotees participating in this procession, walk across the hot embers of the fire pit. Quite a few of the participants walk around the pit, three times, as an indication of their devoutness to and reverence of Sakti. But all participants in the procession, meet at a designated spot away from the temple where costumes, specially prepared for this ritual, are put on, the *Karagam* adorned and the final purificatory rites are performed. Ideally these preparations should take place at the sea or river's edge. Due to the distance of the temple from the sea, and the inaccessibility of the river, as a result of road construction and municipal by-laws, this practice is no longer observed. A smaller temple, about five hundred metres from the Umbilo Temple, is used instead. This temple is also a Sakti temple and is dedicated to Gengammen. Once they have completed all the rituals at the Umbilo Temple, the temple priest and all participants gather on the grounds of the smaller temple to begin their preparations.

At the fire pit, preparations are taking place as well. The logs, which after a few hours have been reduced to glowing cinders, are distributed evenly across the entire fire pit. The *murti* of Sakti is brought down from the temple and is placed on the altar at the head

Figure 7 : COSTUMES AND ORNAMENTATION



A



B



C



D

of the fire pit. At either end of the fire pit are two troughs which are now filled: the trough into which devotees step before entering the pit, is filled with water mixed with tumeric; the trough at the opposite end is filled with milk. The tumeric is meant to act as a form of protection while the trough of milk, into which participants step after having completed their task, is symbolic of the rewards and benefits the fire walker derives after submitting himself to this arduous task in the name of the Divine Mother. Hindus regard milk as a God-given gift to man, which helps to nourish and develop the physical body. Stepping into milk represents the attainment of a level of spirituality which helps the individual to overcome the limitations of his physical being.

Each fire-walker, at the Gengammen Temple, is surrounded by a group comprising family and friends who help with the preparations for the procession. One of the more intricate and complex items to be prepared is the *Karagam* which is carried by a large number of fire walkers (figure 7B). The *Karagam* looks like a very tall arrangement of flowers set in a large brass pot. A tall metal or wooden spire is placed into the pot which contains a mixture of water and rose water. Garlands of marigolds and other flowers which are red in colour, lime and syringa leaves are arranged onto the spire. Some fire walkers use a thread, which has been dyed

with tumeric, to weave an intricate diamond-shaped pattern around the brass pot. A coconut is sometimes used to crown the structure, or it might be placed over the opening of the pot to keep the spire in place. The *Karagam* is regarded as a symbol of Sakti and many participants, to show their adoration of Sakti, use valuable jewellery and necklaces of gold sovereign coins to decorate it. The participants, who carry the *Karagam* on their heads (the seat of the intellect) are making a statement of their aspirations to attain a unity with God. Carrying the *Karagam* on the head is also an indication of the humility with which the devotee surrenders his being to God. Once the *Karagam* has been prepared, devotees perform the *arti* around it with ignited camphor and they may also smear the pot with *vibhuti* (sacred ashes), *kum-kum* (a red powder) and tumeric powder.

For Brown, the *Karagam* represents the power of creation. She states:

All the five elements of the universe are represented in the *karagam*: fire in the form of lighted camphor; water from the ocean, the source of the created, phenomenal world; earth, represented by sandalwood; ether, in the sounds uttered by the priest; and air suffused throughout. The vessel thus may be said to be pregnant with the essential ingredients of the universe.⁹

Brown adds that the *Karagam* "is also strikingly phallic, the tall spire rising three to four feet out of the pot. Its structure is reminiscent of the *lingam* and *yonis*, the male and female genitalia representing cosmic union, which are always shown with the *lingam* rising vertically out of the horizontal *yonis*".¹⁰ The *Karagam* may be regarded as being more than a mere representation of Sakti - it is a symbol of the power of creation which allows the individual soul to ultimately achieve a union with God.

The costumes worn by fire walkers serve two purposes: firstly, it is a recreation of the garb of their Indian origins in an attempt to authenticate their participation in festival by returning to their roots; secondly, the costumes serve as a form of identification with Sakti which results in a cathartic experience for the participant. Women generally use red or yellow saris. The colour red is usually associated with Sakti, while yellow closely resembles the saffron robes worn by *sannyasins*. Men drape white or yellow cotton cloth in the style of the south Indian *dhoti* (figure 7A). They may remain bare-chested or use a loose tunic or shirt. Many participants use *kum-kum* and tumeric powders to colour their faces red or yellow in an attempt to identify with Sakti and her purificatory powers. *Vibhuti*, in some instances, is smeared over the upper torso and face creating an impression of Shiva,

in his guise as an ascetic. Three horizontal lines, representing Shiva's third eye, are drawn on the foreheads, upper arms and chests of participants.

Some men, striving to identify with Sakti, use female blouses and saris. A long plaited hairpiece is attached to the backs of their hair and is decorated with flowers, usually marigolds. One participant, who stated that he represented *Parasakti* (Great Power), wore a loose tunic top and a skirt of syringa leaves. He had a rope draped around his neck and in his hand, he carried a trident (figure 7D). Both weapons are associated with Sakti. His face, arms and legs were coloured red, while on his forehead, tumeric paste was used to paint three horizontal lines. Superimposed on these lines was a red vertical line arising from a large red dot which had the appearance of a very large exclamation mark. This symbol represents the *lingam-yoni* union or the creative energy of God. Women who attempt identification with Sakti usually carry a branch of syringa leaves or a clay pot from which flames issue. At the festival which I observed in the course of this study, only one person wore a costume to identify with a deity other than Sakti. This man, who represented Hanuman, wore a short red *dhoti*, a red shawl across his shoulders and knotted in front, and a red beret-like hat. He carried a club and from the back of his *dhoti*, a rope, coloured in red and blue,

protruded like a tail (figure 7C). I was unable to obtain an explanation for this participant's use of the Hanuman costume at a festival dedicated to Sakti. However, Hanuman, the rescuer of Sita (an incarnation of Sakti), is regarded as an upholder of *dharma* and the protector of Sita. It is probable that this participant was attempting to identify with these functions of Hanuman.

Once they have completed their preparations, the participants have a ritual bath. Buckets of water, mixed with tumeric are poured over the participants. Thereafter a thread which has been dyed with tumeric, is tied onto the wrist of each participant. The bath is meant to be a final cleansing before the devotees walk to the fire pit. The thread, called the *Kanganam*, is an indication of the state of purity which has been achieved by the participants. It also serves as a means of protection for the fire walker since the thread represents the protective powers of Sakti.

Having completed their bath, the participants form a large circle around a *havan kund* where the *havan* is performed. At the end of the *havan*, a temple elder uses a bunch of syringa leaves to sprinkle tumeric water, contained in a bucket, onto the assembled group. A coconut is burst and this acts as a signal for the musicians to commence playing. The music begins on a

slow steady beat which gradually builds up to a crescendo. All the devotees clasp their palms together, shut their eyes and enter into a form of deep meditation. Soon many participants, not all, fall into a state of trance. Once in this state, the participants begin performing dance-like movements in time to the music. Some maintain a slow swaying movement while others are frenzied and energetic in their movement. Participants begin to leap and hop from foot to foot, moving around the assembled group and blessing the observers. A few devotees remain on one spot and rhythmically shake their bodies while observers come to them to receive blessings. For the observers, who receive blessings from the entranced fire walkers, these participants have achieved a state which brings them close to God. Thus these firewalkers are deemed to be media through whom one may reach God to receive His blessings.

Another interesting feature of the behaviour of entranced fire walkers, is the roles they begin to assume once in this state. These fire walkers identify so closely with the different deities, that they begin to perform movements and assume poses in imitation of these deities. One entranced participant, clasped his hands above his head and began performing movements that closely resembled the cobra with an open hood. Another person, probably a relative, began pouring

water over him as he entwined himself around a tree. The participant in the Hanuman costume (described earlier), once entranced, blew out his cheeks, bent his knees and pranced around the crowds like a monkey. Women who identified with Sakti undid their hair and assumed fierce poses and gestures as they lashed the air with ropes, tridents and syringa leaves, as if they were trying to rid the environment of something evil. It is probable that these women were imitating Sakti in her role as cleanser and remover of evil. Sakti, in her guise as Draupadi, refused to tie up her hair until she had fulfilled her vow to rid the land of the Kauravas (the personification of *adharma*).

At this point of the festival, a number of fire walkers have pins, skewers and hooks pinned onto their bodies. This phenomena demonstrates that the fire walker has transcended the physical level of existence and has attained a level of spirituality which makes him oblivious to pain and any physical discomfort. Before a specific part of the body is pierced, *vibhuti* is first smeared over that area. Pins shaped like tridents are inserted into the tongue and through both cheeks. One of my informants stated that this was an effective means of preventing speech, so that one's thoughts may be directed towards God. Hooks, from which lime or coconuts have been suspended are pinned in rows onto the chests and backs of some fire-walkers (figure 7A).

This is symbolic of the purity of the fire walkers and the destruction of their ego. A remarkable feature of this procedure is that at no point is any blood spilled and from their expressions of calm and tranquility it appears that none of the fire walkers feels any pain.

As the hour of three o'clock approaches, the appointed time for the commencement of fire walking, the priest begins ringing a bell as a summons to the participants to form the processional column. At the head of this procession are the musicians followed by temple assistants who sanctify the path to be taken by the fire walkers, by pouring buckets of tumeric water onto the road. As the procession makes its way to the fire pit, fire walkers, who carry *Karagams* or have been pinned with hooks and skewers, are helped on their way by non-participating devotees who pour rose water and *vibhuti* over their pierced tongues or hold the outstretched arms of entranced fire walkers whose arms, backs and chests have been pinned with rows of hooks containing lime and coconuts. At regular intervals camphor cubes are lit on the road which is lined with observers comprising devotees and curious on-lookers.

At the temple, recorded *bhajans* or religious hymns are played over amplifiers to a huge crowd of observers congregated on the hill below the temple, over looking the fire pit (figure 6C). The fenced off area

surrounding the fire pit is empty, but around this area devotees, who do not participate in the procession, assemble. These devotees arrive at the temple throughout the day with offerings of fruit which are placed before the *murti* of Sakti at the head of the fire pit. As the procession enters the precincts of the fire pit, a few of these devotees get caught up in the fervour of the occasion and enter into a state of trance and in this state, join the procession.

Before walking across the fire pit, each fire walker walks around the pit until he approaches the altar containing the *murti* of Sakti. The fire walker pays obeisance to Sakti and returns to the opposite end of the pit from which point he will begin his journey across the pit. Syringa leaves are used to sprinkle tumeric water on the fire walker whose eyes are fixed, in a steady gaze, on Sakti at the opposite end of the pit. The fire walker steps into the trough containing tumeric water and then onto the hot embers of the fire pit. At no point does any participant run or race across the pit, instead many of the participants perform a rhythmic dance, to the beat of the drums, as they traverse the pit. In an attempt to scourge or cleanse themselves, participants dig their feet into the bed of burning charcoal. Even those individuals who are not in a state of trance, do not appear to register any pain. When the participant approaches the opposite

end of the pit, he steps into the trough of milk and then prostrates himself before the image of Sakti. Depending on their vows, the fire walkers may repeat this procedure a number of times. Once all the participants have walked across the pit, other devotees who wish to pay homage are allowed within the fenced off area where they circumambulate the fire pit.

Once they have completed their tasks, the fire walkers make their way to the Sakti shrine. Those fire walkers who are in a state of trance, are frequently stopped by observers who want to be blessed. Once they are within the shrine, the fire walkers prostrate themselves before the *murtis* contained in the inner sanctum. The pins and skewers are removed from their bodies and the priest brings them out of their entranced state by placing his hands on their heads and applying *vibuti* to their foreheads.

The festival is brought to an end three days later when all the participants gather at the temple. In a procession, these devotees circle the temple and assemble before the flag pole. Camphor is lit on the altar, the *arti* is performed around the base of the flag pole and the flag is lowered indicating an official end to the festival.

CHAPTER FIVE NOTES

1. Hilda Kuper, Indian People in Natal, London, Greenwood Press, 1974, p.241.
2. I have relied on the following versions of *The Mahabharata* in attempting this summary of the main plot:

P. Lal, The Mahabharata of Vyasa, New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1980.

C. Rajagopalachari, Mahabharata, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1968.
3. The suffix 'ammen' is a Tamil word which means mother.
4. 'Goinda' is the Tamil form of the name Govinda (another name for Vishnu's avatar Krishna).
5. See Appendix.
6. Balwant Gargi, Folk Theatre of India, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1966, p.133.
7. *Ibid.*, p.139.
8. Syringa leaves are commonly used by Indians as an anti-septic, especially in the treatment of measles and chicken-pox. The leaves are mashed into a paste which is then applied onto the skin of the patient. The patient may also bath in water which has been boiled with syringa leaves.
9. Carolyn Henning Brown, "Tourism and Ethnic Competition in Ritual Form : The Fire-Walkers of Fiji", Oceania, March 1984, p.234.
10. *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION : FROM RITUAL TO THEATRE

The Fire-Walking Festival and *Havan*, like most Hindu religious rituals, both contain many theatrical elements. Among the elements that are common to the theatre and the religious rituals described are:

The Performance Space

As in the theatre, the space for the performance of rituals is clearly defined. An area is demarcated and the audience sits or stands, around or in front of this space. In the *Havan*, the performance space is dictated by the position of the *Havan kund*. The participants seat themselves in a circle around the *kund*, and the audience forms another circle around the participants. This circular arrangement of participants is an almost instinctual human characteristic and is adopted whenever there is a gathering of people with a common focal point. In this instance, the focal point is the priest who utters Truths about the nature of God and the significance of man's role in life, while using the fire as a metaphor. A number of areas become performance spaces during the Fire-Walking Festival. During the nightly *Kalsam Prayer*, the inner sanctum, within the *Drupadi* shrine, becomes the focal point. The audience sits in rows facing the inner sanctum. On the

day of the fire-walking procession, the fire pit becomes the performance space. The audience, in this instance, stands in a circle around the fire pit.

The Performer

The actor in a theatrical performance brings 'life' to a character and script which, until performance, have been passive. In the *Havan* and Fire-Walking Festival, the performers strive to extend their religious experience and bring the philosophy of the religion to 'life' by acting out their beliefs. This may be observed when participants in the *Havan* solemnly offer *samagree* into the *kund*, or when, in a state of ecstasy, the fire-walkers actually engage in dramatizing the significance of the ritual as they move rhythmically across the fire pit. The fire-walkers also wear costumes which assist them in their attempts to identify with *Sakti*, the Divine Mother. The major difference between the performer in the theatre and the performer in a ritual is that the former directs his performance to an audience which is physically present, while the latter directs his performance to God.

The Audience

Special demands are made of audiences at both theatrical and ritual performances. In both instances

the audience is expected to enter a world of 'make believe'. This means that the audience has to willingly suspend reality. The willingness of the audience to do this is evident in the *Havan* when the audience accompanies the priest in chanting the mantras. In the Fire-Walking Festival observers may fall into a state of trance and bless other observers who readily accept these blessings.

Story-Telling

Basic to both theatrical performances and the rituals discussed, is the need for a scenario. Theatrical performances are generally based on a script involving a plot with characters in dramatic or cosmic situations. Both the rituals described are based on the doctrines of the Hindu religion which have been popularized in the form of narratives. The *Havan*, for instance, is based upon the Hindu concept of creation. This concept is contained in a narrative verse, commonly referred to as the *Purusha Sukta*, which appears in the *Vedas*. The Fire-Walking Festival, on the other hand, is based upon the Hindu belief of *Sakti*: God's creative energy. This form of story-telling which leads to ritual performance is a striking feature of Hindu worship.

Hindu religious literature is generally composed of a series of stories in which religious Truths are imparted. Many hymns in the *Vedas* are written in dialogue form where two or more characters address each other. This has led to the belief that the fire sacrifice or *Havan* was an occasion for dramatic performances and story telling during the *Vedic* era. Varapande explains:

The priests and performers of the fire sacrifice assumed different roles during the course of ritual, delivered dialogues with meaningful and symbolic gesticulations, sang hymns and played on musical instruments. Their books contained myths for enactment; their hymns used for recitation at rituals were in dialogue form, and, most interesting, they had dancing gods.¹

Later, when the Aryan and Dravidian cultures began to merge, aided by the advent of the Bhakti cult, the canon of Hindu religious literature increased. To the *Vedas* were added the epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* and the *Puranas*. These works are composed of a series of stories based on the theme of moral law or *Dharma*. In the epics a central story or core is used to link a number of myths and legends. The Rama-Sita story forms the core of *The Ramayana*, while the Pandava-Kaurava conflict serves this purpose in *The Mahabharata*. The *Puranas* deal primarily with myths and legends concerning the gods of the Hindu Pantheon. In

many instances these stories serve as the basis of many religious festivals or the stories might be dramatized or narrated on such occasions. Commenting on the impact of the epics on Hinduism, Stutley states:

The two great Hindu Epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, have profoundly affected the religious life of India. They are recited throughout the sub-continent by professional story tellers, so enabling even the illiterate to become conversant with them. Both Epics were originally secular martial ballads transmitted orally, recounting the adventures of ancient heroes and describing royal sacrificial ritual. Later the priests interpolated long passages on theology, ritual, morals, ethics and statecraft, thus making both Epics theistic.²

The profound effect of story telling, embellished with song and dance, on religious occasions is summed up on the following verse from the *Bhagavata Purana*:

Singing along with others, chanting loudly and dancing, acting out My transcendental pastimes, and hearing and telling stories about Me, the devotee should for some time absorb himself in such festivity.³

This verse further emphasises the Hindu approach to worship. For the Hindu, worship is a festival, a celebration of God's creative energy which enables man, through consecutive births, to break free from the bondage of material existence and attain a oneness with

God. Song, dance and drama are the means through which the Hindu strives to identify and act out the principles of *Dharma* which eventually lead to eternal bliss.

While story telling and theatre are distinctive features of Hindu religious rituals, the Indian theatre has, in a similar way, been affected by the religious rituals and the stories associated with them. The earliest known treatise on Indian theatre is the *Natya Shastra* by Bharata, which Shekhar states, was already in existence in the second century B.C.⁴ The style of this comprehensive work owes much to the epics. It begins with an explanation of the origins of drama and goes on to describe various aspects of the theatre, including a description of the different types of play-houses, the use of gestures, movement and dance, the different kinds of plays, and the use of costumes and make-up. All this is done in the form of a discourse between sages and Bharata. Another similarity between the epics and the *Natya Shastra* is the introduction. The epics begin with an explanation of the manner in which they came to be composed. Bharata approaches his subject in a similar vein. All three works offer this explanation in the form of a story. The *Ramayana*, for instance, begins with the divine sage, Narada, relating the story of Rama's life to Valmiki (the author). Deeply moved by this tale, Valmiki goes to bath in the

river Ganges where he witnesses two herons amongst the trees. A fowler's arrow brings down one of the herons. Valmiki shouts out his anger at this deed and finds that he has vocalized his deep hurt in a metre that is appropriate for musical accompaniment. The creator god Brahma appears before Valmiki and states that the metre had revealed itself to him (Valmiki) so that he might use it to write an account of Rama's life. In a similar style, the *Natya Shastra* opens with a group of sages approaching Bharata with the request that he explains the origins of the *Natya Shastra* to them.

THE ORIGINS OF DRAMA ACCORDING TO BHARATA

Bharata begins his account of the origins of drama by calling his work the *Natyaveda* - the fifth *Veda*. Since the *Vedas* originate at the beginning of each cycle of creation, Bharata immediately establishes a divine origin of drama. The history of drama accordingly, begins during the Silver Age, the *Tretayuga*, when "people became addicted to sensual pleasures, were under the sway of desire and greed, became affected with jealousy and anger and [thus] found their happiness mixed with sorrow."⁵ The gods, with Indra as their leader, approach the creator god Brahma and request him to create a diversion that is both visible and audible. Because the *Vedas* were not accessible to

the *Sudra* class, Brahma is requested to create another *Veda* that would be available to all classes of man (*varunas*). Brahma accedes to the request and "from his memory of all the *Vedas*, shaped this *Natyaveda* compiled from the four of them."⁶ Once he has accomplished this feat, Brahma informs Indra that he has composed "semi-historical tales"⁷ which should be dramatized by the gods. Indra tells Brahma that the gods are incapable of enacting the plays and that the help of a learned sage who has mastered all the *Vedas*, should be obtained. Brahma then approaches Bharata who learns the *Natyaveda* and imparts this knowledge to his one hundred sons.

While preparing for a performance, Bharata is again approached by Brahma who requests him to make use of the "Graceful Style"⁸ of dramatic presentation as well. Bharata explains that he is unable to do this as he has no female performers. Brahma solves this problem by creating "from his mind nymphs who were skilful in embellishing the drama."⁹

Following Brahma's advice, Bharata performs the first play at the Banner Festival of Indra. The play, which deals with the gods' victory over the demons, earns the disfavour of the latter group who begin to wreak havoc at the performance. Brahma approaches the demons and asks them for their reason for ruining the dramatic performance. The demons explain that they are peeved

because they are depicted in an unfavourable light. On hearing this, Brahma explains the purpose of drama:

The drama as I have devised, is a mimicry of actions and conducts of people, which is rich in various emotions, and which depicts different situations. This will relate to actions of man good, bad and indifferent, and will give courage, amusement and happiness as well as counsel to them all.¹⁰

Having consoled the demons, Brahma advises Bharata to perform a play dealing with the Churning of the Ocean.¹¹ Because the play deals with the co-operation between the gods and the demons to accomplish a common task, the performance pleases both groups. Shiva too, is pleased when a special performance is presented before him and he advises Bharata to include the element of dance.

SOME FEATURES OF EARLY INDIAN DRAMA

Bharata's narrative concerning the origins and nature of drama emphasizes certain characteristics of early Indian drama. The myth significantly illustrates the Hindu view that religious ritual and theatre exist side-by-side. Theatrical performances may be utilized to heighten the significance of religious festivals, while the religion itself serves as a source for

theatrical experiences. Brahma in attempting to define drama to the demons states:

Stories taken out of the Vedic love as well as Semi-Historical Tales (so embellished that they are) capable of giving pleasure, in the world, is called drama.¹²

Religious literature came to be a popular source for dramatic plots among the early Indian dramatists. The Hindu penchant for story-telling as a means of illustrating the doctrines of the religion had already made the Epics a firm favourite with the Hindu populace of India. It was only natural that the dramatists should be influenced by this phenomenon and use the Epics as their inspiration.

Because they originated from religious sources, the early Indian drama tended to be didactic. The plays became vehicles for illustrating the effect of *Dharma* on the individual. The view that one's actions determined one's destiny or fate became a dominant theme. In Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*, the heroine is made to suffer because of her transgression from *Dharma*. *Sakuntala* had failed in her public duty by not according a proper reception to a distinguished sage. The sage, Durvasas, curses her and, in so doing, causes *Sakuntala* to be forgotten by and separated from her husband, King Dusyanta. Kale in his introduction to the

play states that Sakuntala was deserving of this punishment. He argues.

It was her duty to welcome the guests. She has welcomed the first guest - the king - with all love, and now, when the second guest - Maharisi Durvasas - arrives, she neglects her duty. She is now a married lady; in a few days she will be the Chief Queen and in a few months, mother of a Cakravartin. How will she fulfil her duties as a Queen if she is so careless?¹³

Kale adds that Dusyanta is also made to suffer, as a result of the curse, because he too had failed in his duty by not informing Sakuntala's guardians about his love for and marriage to her.

The roots of the curse are, thus, to be found in the unfortunate errors of Sakuntala and Dusyanta. Yet those mistakes are not conscious errors, and so the curse, though dreadful, is not a permanent one. We know that it will end someday and that reunion will follow. The curse ends in the reunion of the two lovers blessed by the divine sage.¹⁴

Sakuntala's initial pain is made all the more poignant since she, like Dusyanta, has no knowledge of the curse. When she is spurned by her husband, her suffering is intense because she can find no reason for his behaviour. Dusyanta, too, undergoes a similar torment when he eventually remembers his wife, but finds himself hopelessly incapable of finding her again. Their eventual reunion is not only joyous but

also marks the beginning of a new life which the characters will approach with a broadened perspective of moral duty or *dharma*, thus ensuring that their joy is eternal.

A further feature of early Indian drama is the absence of tragedy. Although the Sakuntala-Dusyanta fable has all the ingredients of tragedy, Kalidasa consciously avoids this route. Like other Indian playwrights his motives are governed by the Hindu vision of life which has been shaped by a "dharma-oriented world view."¹⁵ van Buitenen explains:

The playwright does not pit his character against a force that is bent on his defeat; he places him in a facsimile of the dharmic society and sets him on his way.¹⁶

The characters' actions then determine the fate that befall them. Through suffering the characters learn about their transgressions and in this way they acquire a keener sense of *Dharma* and of the effects of karma in determining the nature of one's life. The acquisition of this vision means that the characters have evolved and occupy a higher plane of existence. For the Hindu, this is reason for celebration and joy, and not despair. Hence tragedy has no place in the Hindu scheme of things. Rangacharya states that the tragic element "was saved (from) fateful conclusions because of faith

on the one hand and of ignorance on the other. The Hindu mind defied history by persisting in its belief of a happier life and a happier world to come."¹⁷

CONCLUSION NOTES

1. M.L. Varadpande, Religion and Theatre, New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 1983, p.7.
2. Stutley, Hinduism, p.32.
3. Disciples of His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, trans., Srimad Bhagavatam of Krsna - Dvaipayana Vyasa Eleventh Canto, Los Angeles, The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1988, p.649.
4. I. Shekhar, Sanskrit Drama : Its Origin and Decline, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1977, p.44.
5. C. Rajagopalachari, Ramayana, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1968, pp.15-16.
6. Manomohan Ghosh, trans., The Natyasastra of Bharata-Muni : A Treatise on Ancient Indian Dramaturgy and Historionics Vol. 1, Calcutta, Manisha Garnthalaya Pvt. Ltd., 1967, p.2.
7. *Ibid.*, p.4.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.
10. *Ibid.*, p.15.
11. See Chapter Two.
12. Ghosh, trans., The Natyasastra Vol 1, p.16.
13. M.R. Kale, ed. Introduction, to The Abhijnana-sakuntalam of Kalidasa, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1980, p.79.
14. *Ibid.*, pp.79-80.
15. J.A.B. van Buitenen, "The Classical Drama", in Edward C. Dimock, Jr. et al, The Literatures of India : An Introduction, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1978, p.86.

16. *Ibid.*
17. Adya Rangacharya, Drama in Sanskrit Literature, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1967, p.105.

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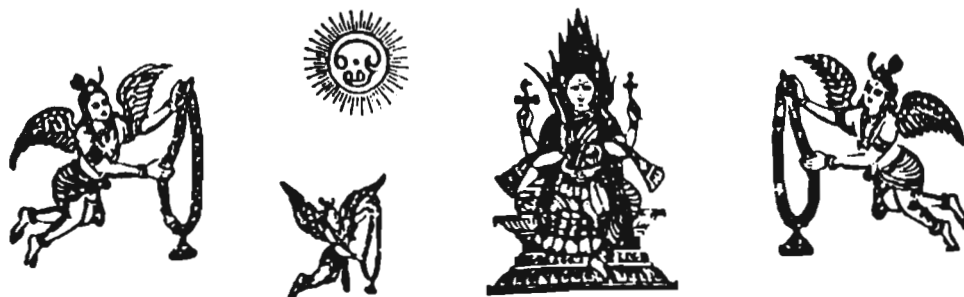
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APPENDIX A

HANDBILL ANNOUNCING THE FIRE-WALKING FESTIVAL



UMBILO SHREE DRAUPADIAMMAN ALAYAM

890 BELLAR ROAD, SECOND RIVER, CATO MANOR, DURBAN — PHONE: 811329

AUM SATHIE ESTABLISHED -----1875 OM NAMASIVAYA

UMBILO TEMPLE

*THE TRUSTEES, OFFICIALS AND MEMBERS OF THE ABOVE ALAYAM INVITES YOU,
YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS TO THE UNDERMENTIONED PRAYER FUNCTIONS.*

FIRE WALKING

SUNDAY 11 MARCH 1990

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| (1) KALSAM | THURSDAY 22/02/1990 AT 6.00 P.M. |
| (2) FLAG HOISTING | FRIDAY 02/03/1990 AT 6.00 P.M. |
| (3) FIRE WALKING PROCESSION | SUNDAY 11/03/1990 AT 3.00 P.M. |
| (4) MAHASIVRATHRI | FRIDAY 23/02/1990 AT 6.00 P.M. TO 6.00 A.M. |

FIRE INITATION & CONSECRATION CEREMONY COMMENCING AT 8.30 AM SHARP

ALL FIREWALKERS WILL WALK ON THE EMBERS AT THEIR OWN RISK

SATURDAY NIGHT 10/03/1990

"A GRAND ALL NIGHT DANCE AN EPISODE FROM THE 'MAHABHARATHA' EIGHTEEN DAY BATTLE WILL BE ENACTED, FOLLOWED BY FULFILMENT OF A QUEENS VOW A DAY BREAK"

FIREWALKERS & DEVOTEES---OBAYAM FEES R10.00 AND OVER.
KANGANAAM FOR FIRE PIT PREPARATION OF R2.00 AND OVER.

FOR FURTHER PARTICULARS PLEASE CONTACT KOOBAN APPAVOO AT 923640
OR 252383 EXT 225 AND ALSO MR N. NAICKER AT 824272.

ALL DEVOTEES AND WELLWISHERS ARE KINDLY INVITED. THE TEMPLE OFFICIALS
AND COMMITTEE THANKS ALL DONORS FOR THEIR ANNUAL SUPPORT.

YOUR GENEROUS CASH DONATIONS WILL BE APPRECIATED

FIREWALKING AND SIVARATHREE PRAYERS WILL BE CONDUCTED BY OUR PRIEST MR A.V. NAIDOO (SCOTTY)
ASSISTED BY MR CHOKKIE PADAYACHEE

APPENDIX B

THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

The Indian labourers, who were shipped to South Africa in 1860 to work on the sugar estates of Natal brought with them the traditions and culture of their homeland. To an already diverse South African culture was added Indian music, dance and drama. Like their counterparts on the Indian sub-continent, the entertainment of the newly arrived settlers in Natal took the form of music and dance recitals, story-telling and folk dramas. The performances took place on important religious occasions and at celebrations such as weddings and births. Folk dramas, like those performed by Therukoothu troupes, were popular and since the plots of these performances were based on the Epics, this tradition has come to have strong links with temple celebrations. These traditions are still kept alive by cultural organizations and temple groups who arrange eistedfords and recitals, and by Indian films - a popular form of entertainment amongst Indian South Africans. Songs, dance sequences, and scenes from Indian films, performed by local artistes, form the core of revue-type shows which are regularly performed at the Durban City Hall for instance. These "Eastern Variety Shows" or "Extravaganzas", as they are called by producers like Mrs Pinky Mothi, begin at about seven

o'clock in the evening and end at midnight. Such performances are not uniquely South African. Their structure, composition and length imitate shows of a similar type that are popular in India.¹

Alongside these developments, a distinctive style of theatre that is singularly Indian South African has evolved out of the South African experience. Generally regarded as a "problem" and "a parasite in the land"² by the white colonial population of Natal, the Indian South African felt the brunt of prejudices and racism very soon after his arrival. These racist sentiments were eventually formulated into legal acts of parliament which saw the Indian, together with the African and so-called "Coloured", being uprooted from their homes, forcibly moved to areas that were a distance from the city centre, and denied many of the basic rights of citizenship. South African society became compartmentalized into racial groupings, each developing its own culture and identity.

Growing out of this culture of fragmentation, the theatre of Indian South Africans mixes both eastern and western influences within a distinctly South African context. Historically, western influence has been most pronounced in the field of education. The plays produced at Indian schools tended to be standard classics of the English stage with plays by Shakespeare

and Shaw being frequently produced. The enthusiasm with which these school productions were received led to several attempts at establishing amateur theatre groups. Further impetus was given to these ventures with the arrival of Krishna Shah who was invited to remount his production of Rabindranath Tagore's *The King of the Dark Chamber* after its initial success in America. The play was produced in conjunction with Union Artists in Johannesburg and was one of the earliest plays in South Africa to have a racially mixed local cast.

The Durban Academy of Theatre Arts was formed in 1962, when several people who were involved in Shah's production got together to form an organization that would maintain the spirit which had been kindled during the run of the play. DATA (as the Academy came to be called) was an important landmark in the development of the Indian South African Theatre. Although it survived by producing established classics like *The Merchant of Venice* and *A School for Scandal*, it was responsible for unleashing the talent of Ronnie Govender who has played an almost pivotal role in shaping the development of theatre within the Indian community. DATA was soon to feel the effects of the segregationist laws of the country and its demise was inevitable due to the problems incurred by racially mixed casts and audiences.³

Led by Muthal Naidoo and Ronnie Govender, who were original members of DATA, The Shah Theatre Academy was formed to continue the traditions set up by DATA. Like DATA, the early productions of The Shah Theatre Academy were popular western plays like Odet's *Golden Boy*, Miller's *All My Sons* and Moliere's *School for Wives*. During this period the Shah theatre also presented an original play, *Swami*, by Ronnie Govender.⁴

Emerging concurrently with the attempts at establishing permanent theatre companies, was a spirit of black identification. The Indian began to regard his struggle as a part of the concerted drive by the oppressed black majority of the country against the white government's racist laws. This spirit came to be reflected in the plays that were presented from the late sixties onwards, when the theatrical activity increased and several theatre companies emerged. Larlham points out that this upsurge in theatrical activity "represents a response to pressure from White government and an increasing awareness of the need to contact and inform the people of social and political issues."⁵

During this period the first full-time professional company, Music and Drama (MAD), was established by Maynard Peters and Babs Pillay. MAD managed to survive for a period of eight years even though salaries were small. Fugard's *The Blood Knot*, Orton's *Loot* and Benjy

Francis's original piece *Melt One*, were some of the plays that were presented. Guru Pillay's *It's A Colourful World* was responsible for bringing the company to the notice of the general public of Durban.⁶ The revue was composed of a series of amusing skits and songs which ridiculed South Africa's racial laws. In one of these skits, the concept of separate development is taken to its ridiculous limits in a boxing ring where one of the boxers is black and other white. The revue attracted the attention of the security police and the censor board who banned the script of the show but allowed the performances to continue. The security police harrassed the cast by keeping them under constant surveillance and regularly questioning them. This harrassment eventually led to the closure of the show in spite of the packed houses it played to.

Another theatre group, The Theatre Council of Natal, also made a huge impact upon the Indian and other black communities in Natal. TECON, as it came to be called, was formed in 1969 by a group of students at the University College for Indians at Salisbury Island in Durban. The founder members and main organizers, Saths Cooper, Ms Sam Moodley and Strini Moodley, were all active members of the Black Consciousness Movement. TECON grew into a strong and stable company. Its early productions tended to be established European plays like *The Caretaker* and *Look Back In Anger*. In 1971,

with its production of *Antigone In '71* (based on Anouilh's *Antigone*), TECON began its concerted drive at tackling the South African political scene.

This production, stressing as it did the theme of resistance to unjust rule, proved successful with Black audiences which had no previous exposure to theatre.⁷

The indignities involved in applying for permits to perform before non-racial audiences led to TECON declaring itself an exclusively black organization in 1973. In the same year a programme of music and poetry, called *Black Images*, was mounted. In March 1973 Saths Cooper and Strini Moodley, as part of the leadership of the Black Consciousness Movement, were served with banning orders. Eventually the organization itself was declared a subversive organization and was forced to close.⁸

THE EMERGENCE OF THE INDIAN SOUTH AFRICAN THEATRE

In 1972 Ronnie Govender presented a one-act play at the Orient Hall in Durban and with it he began a new culture of theatrical performance in South Africa. The play was *The Lahnee's Pleasure* and it marked the birth of the theatre of the Indian South African. Although Ronnie Govender had previously written and produced his

own plays, including *Beyond Calvary*, *The First Stone*, *His Brother's Keeper* and *Swami*, the subject and themes of these plays were approached in an essentially Eurocentric style. For the first time, on the professional stage, the local Indian audiences were confronted with familiar characters and a setting with which they could identify. "The scene throughout the play is the 'non-white' (meaning Indian and 'Coloured') bar of a white-owned hotel in a small Natal North Coast town."⁹ The setting alludes to a tradition amongst Indians, who were denied access to bottle stores. This meant that they could not purchase alcohol and consume it in their own homes. Because of this, the "Indian Bar" culture emerged. These bars were attached to white hotels and became popular with the working classes, who frequented these bars on Fridays and Saturdays after "payday". Some aspects of this culture are established in the opening scene of the play:

SUNNY : On weekdays very quiet.
 STRANGER : Picks up over weekends, I suppose?
 SUNNY : Yeah. Friday Saturday, full up.
 See the mill here?
 STRANGER : Oh, is that where the smoke is coming
 from?
 SUNNY : Yeah. All these fullers working in the
 mill, you know. These fullers get paid
 Friday. They come here - full bro, man.¹⁰

Against this background, Ronnie Govender creates characters who imitate the lifestyle, including the accents and slang, of the working class majority of the local Indian community. In their interaction, the

characters recall past experiences which graphically illustrate the Indian culture in South Africa and the injustices they had to suffer as a result of racist laws:

STRANGER : ...What a great place Mayville was....
 SUNNY : You-all had a big place there bro?
 STRANGER : Yes, Sunny. You know, we built that house ourselves. My father was a baker's driver and he earned very little, but he always had this dream that he would one day build his own house. From the little he got he put enough together and we all pitched in every afternoon after school the whole family would give a hand, and we eventually built it. Our own house. We lived so happily there until the whites came and they just kicked us out....¹¹

In this exchange reference is made to the Cato Manor area in Durban which was home to a stable, thriving community until it was uprooted when the area (in terms of the Group Areas Act) was declared white. The intense pain and frustration that the people had to suffer when they were forcibly removed from their homes, left an indelible mark on their collective memories. As a result constant references are made to the Group Areas Act in many of the plays that followed *The Lahnee's Pleasure*.

This excerpt also demonstrates the beginning of another phenomenon that would be developed by Ronnie Govender and used by other local playwrights. The Stranger in his reminiscence has taken on the role of the

traditional Indian story-teller. Throughout the play the story-telling technique, which occurs as a part of the normal exchanges between characters, is used.

For the local audiences, who vociferously showed their enthusiasm at every performance, the novelty of hearing their own speech patterns and slangs imitated on stage was the highlight of the production.

MOTHIE : Yeah, where you can get man like that today. Little bit money they got, little bit education they got, they think they somebody, they somebody! Arreh, our time, man - our time. Saturday night! Jolling night! Arreh, what big, big prayers we'll have. Wedding! Big, big wedding we'll have....¹²

In this monologue the character, Mothie, not only recreates the speech patterns of a typical working class Indian, he also vividly portrays the typically Indian way of doing things, like the "big, big prayers" and "big, big, wedding."

Govender is also unobtrusively didactic in his play. Mothie goes on to state:

Saturday night, all night dancing.
Arreh, all night dancing! Wedding
night! Your father, mandraji fuller,
right? And me, I'm roti fuller.
Arreh but dancing time, we'll dance
Natchannia together.¹³

Here, Mothie points out the absurdity of the differences between Hindi ("roti") speaking Hindus and Tamil ("mandraji") speaking Hindus who are able to put aside their differences while dancing together.

The Stranger in the play symbolises the emerging character of Indians in the country, and acts as a contrast to the other two characters. Educated, self-confident and articulate, the Stranger tries to enlighten both Mothie and Sunny about their attitude to whites which is epitomised by their embarrassing grovelling. The Stranger's efforts are lost on these two characters and the play ends with his intense frustration.

LAHNEE : Aw, come on Sammy, have one on me....
 STRANGER : (*Whirling towards the LAHNEE in absolute fury*) My name is not Sammy. You got no right to call me Sammy! Sammy!
In the silence that follows, MOTHIE tries to restrain the STRANGER.
 MOTHIE : Boss only joking, bhai....
 STRANGER : Leave me alone....
 MOTHIE : Bhai, don't be so angry. (*Tries to hold him by the arm*).
 STRANGER : (*Angrily pushing him away*) Leave me alone, you fool.
 (*To the LAHNEE*) One day, white man, one day! (*Exit*).
Shocked silence.
 LAHNEE : He's just done himself out of a drink. You get these damn agitators everywhere!
 MOTHIE : Don't worry about him, boss. You want I must sing for you, boss....¹⁴

A year after *The Lahnee's Pleasure* made its debut, another innovative production opened at the Orient

Hall. Guru Pillay had written a musical, *Saras*, which was directed by drama lecturer Roy Jithoo and performed by a cast which included many university students. Guru Pillay constructed the play along the lines of a typical Indian film and featured "star-crossed lovers", music and dance sequences. *Saras*, a Tamil speaking university student from Tintown, falls in love with Suresh, a Gujarati student from Westville. This basic plot is used as a springboard for Pillay to lash out against the inhumanity of the Group Areas Act, the foolishness of the Indian caste system and the pig-headedness of the affluent Indian. *Saras* was a highly successful venture and was awarded the Durban Theatre Critics Award for outstanding achievement in 1974.¹⁵

Kessie Govender, who was the original Mothie in *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, wrote and produced his own play in December 1974, and continued the tradition that Ronnie Govender began. The play, *Stablexpense*, was set in a council home in Chatsworth and satirized the lifestyle of the working classes - their worship of the white boss, their unquestioning belief in religious traditions, their partiality towards alcohol, and their cunning submissiveness to authority. The play ran for approximately a year and toured the Indian suburbs in and around Durban. Kessie Govender's next success was *Working Class Hero* which was set at a building construction site. The play dealt with the policy of

job reservation and the double standards employed by the Indian when dealing with the African. The Indian becomes the oppressor and the African labourer, the oppressed.¹⁶

Two actors who were frequent performers in the plays of both Ronnie Govender and Kessie Govender, began producing plays of their own in the 1980's and came up with a string of commercially successful ventures. Mohamed Ali and Essop Khan maintain the tradition that was started by Ronnie Govender. Their plays include *The Jamal Syndrome*, its sequel *The Jamal Syndrome II* and 1991 saw the opening of their third production, *My Second Wife*. One drama academic cynically labelled these productions as "curry powder operas" - an allusion to the typically Indian domestic situations the plays exploit.

Other playwrights, Ronnie Govender included, have begun to select elements from previously successful productions and are using these to develop the form and shape of their plays. One of these elements, the story-telling technique, is being heavily exploited. Ronnie Govender uses this technique in his one-man production, *At the Edge* while Kriben Pillay combines story-telling with song and dance in his play *Looking for Muruga*. In this play, which deals with the search for identity, the playwright questions the state of theatre amongst

Indians. One of the characters, Sherwin, is researching material for a play he is about to write. This leads him to a bar he used to frequent as a student where he hopes to find Muruga, the waiter who used to serve and amuse him. In developing this basic plot, Pillay experiments with a number of theatrical techniques and at one stage, his characters even go into a Theatre of the Absurd routine.¹⁷ Indian dances and music intersperse the action which eventually culminates in an Indian Dance sequence depicting a Hindu myth. This mixture of styles characterizes the strides taken by playwrights and performers in finding a form and identity for a type of theatre that is uniquely South African.

The theatre of Indian South Africans reflects a culture which has evolved in an environment where the different racial groups were rigidly kept apart by legislation. At the same time this theatre serves as a vehicle for protest against social injustices and oppression. This is achieved within a peculiarly Indian framework that has been influenced by the rich traditions of religious practices in which dance, music and story-telling play an important role.

As the barriers of racial segregation begin to crumble and South Africans of different races begin to seek a common identity, a culture which reflects and unites

the peoples of South Africa has to surface. To achieve this, the cultural knowledge and accomplishments of the various South African communities, that have evolved along racial lines, will have to merge. The theatre of Indian South Africans will make a meaningful contribution to a theatrical form that represents the South African nation and a South African culture.

APPENDIX B NOTES

1. A number of these shows, featuring Indian film stars and film music directors together with musicians and dancers, have been imported to South Africa since the unbanning of the African National Congress on February 2, 1990. Because of the South African Government's desire to initiate reforms, the Indian Government has begun to ease its cultural boycott against South Africa.
2. The Natal Witness, 27 May 1911, editorial, cited by A.J. van Wyk, "'Roses and Hue' : Public Opinion in Natal, 1910-1915", in Bridglal Pachai, edit., South Africa's Indians : The Evolution of a Minority, Washington, University Press of America Inc., 1979, p.103.
3. Charles M. Pillay, "A Brief History of the Theatre of Indian South Africans in Durban", (Honours mini-dissertation, Department of Speech and Drama, University of Durban-Westville, 1979), pp.7-9.
4. *Ibid.*, p.7.
5. Peter Larlham, Black Theatre, Dance and Ritual in South Africa, Ann Arbor, Michigan, UMI Research Press, 1985, p.76.
6. Pillay, "A Brief History of the Theatre of Indian South Africans in Durban", pp.10-11.
7. Larlham, Black Theatre, Dance and Ritual in South Africa, pp.76-77.
8. *Ibid.*, pp.76-77.
9. Ronnie Govender, The Lahnee's Pleasure, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, n.d., p.3.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.
11. *Ibid.*, p.17.
12. *Ibid.*, p.7.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, pp.41-42.
15. Pillay, "A Brief History of the Theatre of Indian South Africans in Durban", pp.16-17.
16. *Ibid.*, pp.17-19.

17. Theatre of the Absurd refers to a type of drama that flourished in Europe after World War I. These plays highlight the irrational, uncertain and confusing elements in life. The plays deal with the individual's attempts to survive and find meaning in an essentially hostile environment. A characteristic feature of these plays are the series of apparently meaningless and pointless exchanges between two characters in the plays. Two tramps in Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" engage in a series of verbal games, while in Harold Pinter's plays 'quick-fire' verbal exchanges are used to create tension. These verbal gymnastics have become the hallmark of Theatre of the Absurd dramatists. It is this routine that Kriben Pillay imitates in his play.