

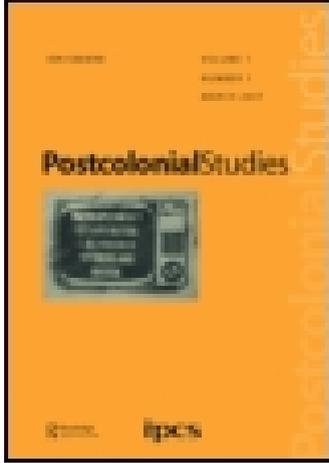
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# A report on the present state of health of the gods and goddesses in South Asia<sup>1</sup>

ASHIS NANDY

Great Pan is not dead;  
he simply emigrated  
to India.  
Here, the gods roam freely,  
disguised as snakes or monkeys. ...  
It is a sin to shove a book aside  
with your foot,  
A sin to slam books down  
hard on a table, ...  
You must learn how to turn the pages gently  
Without disturbing Sarasvati,  
Without offending the tree  
From whose wood the paper was made.

Sujata Bhatt, *A Different History* (1993)

Some years ago, in the city of Bombay, a young Muslim playwright wrote and staged a play that had gods—Hindu gods and goddesses—as major characters. Such plays are not uncommon in India; some would say that they are all too common. This one also included gods and goddesses who were heroic, grand, scheming and comical. This provoked not the audience, but the Hindu nationalists, particularly the Hindu Mahasabha, for long a spent political force in Bombay, the city being dominated by a more powerful Hindu nationalist formation, the Shiv Sena.

It is doubtful if those who claimed they had been provoked were really provoked. It is more likely that they pretended to be offended and precipitated an incident to make their political presence felt. After all, such plays have been written in India since time immemorial. Vikram Savarkar of the Hindu Mahasabha—a grandson of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), the non-believing father of Hindu nationalism who thoughtfully gifted South Asia the concept of Hindutva—organized a demonstration in front of the theatre where the play was being staged. The demonstrators caught hold of the playwright and threatened to lynch him. Ultimately, they forced the writer to bow down and touch Savarkar's feet, to apologize for writing the play. The

humiliation of the young playwright was complete; it was duly photographed and published in newspapers and newsmagazines.

Though Savarkar later claimed that Hinduism had won, for he had not allowed a Muslim to do what Muslims had not allowed Hindus to do with Islam's symbols of the sacred, at least some Hindus felt that on that day Hindutva might have won, but Hinduism had lost. It had lost because a tradition at least fifteen hundred years old was sought to be dismantled. During these fifteen hundred years, a crucial identifier of Hinduism—as a religion, a culture and a way of life—has been the particular style of interaction humans have had with gods and goddesses. Deities in everyday Hinduism, from the heavily Brahminic to the aggressively non-Brahminic, are not entities outside everyday life, nor do they preside over life from outside; they constitute a significant part of it. Their presence is telescoped not only into one's transcendental self but, to use Alan Roland's tripartite division, but also into one's familial and individualized selves and even into one's most light-hearted, comical, naughty moments.<sup>2</sup> Gods are beyond and above humans but they are, paradoxically, not outside the human fraternity.<sup>3</sup> You can adore or love them, you can disown or attack them, you can make them butts of wit and sarcasm. Savarkar, not being literate in matters of faith and pitifully picking up ideas from the culture of Anglo-India to turn Hinduism into a 'proper' religion from an inchoate pagan faith, was only ensuring the humiliating defeat of Hinduism as it is known to most Hindus.

Since about the middle of the last century, perhaps beginning from the 1820s, there has been a deep embarrassment and discontent with the lived experience of Hinduism, the experience that, paradoxically, the young Muslim playwright, Savarkar's victim, represented. Vikram Savarkar is only the last written a galaxy of people—Hindus, non-Hindus, Indians, non-Indians—who have felt uncomfortable with the overpopulated Indian pantheon, its richly textured, pagan personalities, its unpredictability, variety and all too human foibles. For nearly a hundred and fifty years, we have seen a concerted, systematic effort to either eliminate these gods and goddesses from Indian life or to tame them and make them behave. I am saying 'Indian' and not 'Hindu' self-consciously, for these gods and goddesses not only populate the Hindu world but regularly visit and occasionally poach on territories outside it. They are not strangers outside India, either.<sup>4</sup> By indirectly participating in the effort to retool or gentrify them, Savarkar was only following the tradition of Baptist evangelists like William Carey and Joshua Marshman and rationalist religious and social reformers such as Rammohun Roy and Swami Dayanand in nineteenth-century India. All of them felt that the country's main problem was its idolatry and the rather poor personal quality of its gods and goddesses. These reformers wanted Indians to get rid of their superfluous deities and either live in a fully secularized, sanitized world in which rationality and scientific truth would prevail or, alternatively, set up a regular monotheistic God, as 'proper' Christians and Muslims had done. Vikram Savarkar was attacking in the playwright a part of his self no longer acceptable, but not easy to disown either.

The early attacks on the gods and goddesses by the various Hindu reform movements, from the Brahma Samaj to the Arya Samaj, have been dutifully

picked up by formations till recently at the periphery of politics in India, such as the ones centring around Hindutva. Today, overwhelmed by the experience of the Ramjanmabhumi movement and the destruction of the Babri mosque at Ayodhya in 1992, we no longer care to read the entire literature of Hindutva produced over the last seventyfive years. We think we know what they have to say. If all nationalist thought are the same, as Ernest Gellner believed, Hindu nationalist thought cannot be any different, we are sure.<sup>5</sup> If you, however, read the Hindutva literature, you will find in it a systematic, consistent, often direct attack on Hindu gods and goddesses. Most stalwarts of Hindutva have not been interested in Hindu religion and have said so openly. Their tolerance towards the rituals and myths of their faith have been even lower. Many of them have come to Hindutva as a reaction to everyday, vernacular Hinduism.

This rejection is a direct product of nineteenth-century Indian modernity and its models of the ideal Hindu as a Vedantic European or, for that matter, Vedantic Muslim. That is why till recently no *shakha* or branch of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh or RSS, the voluntary force that constitutes the steel frame of Hindu nationalism, was allowed to have, by the conventions of the RSS, any icon of any deity except Bharatmata, Mother India. The Ramjanmabhumi temple is the first temple for which the RSS has shed any tear or shown any concern. And that concern, to judge by their participation in worship or rituals at the temple, seems skin-deep.

In 1990–91 I interviewed at great length the chief priest of the Ramjanmabhumi temple said, a remarkably courageous, ecumenical man of religion who was murdered soon after the mosque was demolished. He told that during the previous seven years of the movement in support of the temple, no major political leader of the movement had cared to worship at the temple, except one who had had a *puja* done through a third party without herself visiting the temple. I may tell at this point my favourite, probably apocryphal, story about the devotion to Ram of the Hindu nationalists. Once, in course of his only visit to a RSS *shakha*, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi looked around and found on the walls of the *shakha* portraits of some of the famous martial heroes of Hindutva such as Shivaji and Rana Pratap. Being a devotee of Ram, Gandhi naturally asked, ‘Why have you not put up a portrait of Ram as well?’ Those were not the days of the Ramjanmabhumi movement and the RSS leader showing him around said, ‘No, that we cannot do. Ram is too effeminate to serve our purpose’.

I am not going to speak about such strained styles of relating to gods and goddesses, which invite one to fight their causes without caring for them. I am going to speak about gods and goddesses who inhabit the world we live in, sometimes as house guests, sometimes as our neighbour’s headache, sometimes even as private ghosts without whom we think we can live in greater peace. The literary theorist D.R. Nagaraj accuses me of writing on these things as an outsider. ‘You come to the gods and goddesses as an intellectual, academically’, he says. I have often felt like telling him that I do not want to come to them, but they force me. There is an inevitable logic through which these obstreperous deities infect our life, pervade it, even invade and take it over,

independently of our likes and dislikes. Like most other South Asians, belonging to a whole range of faiths, I have no choice in the matter.

For even in some persons, communities, cults, sects and religions denying gods and goddesses, there persist relationships typical of religions with a surfeit of gods and goddesses. Gods and goddesses may survive as potentialities even in the most austere monotheistic, anti-idolatrous faiths. They are not permitted into the main hall, but they are there, just outside the door, constantly threatening to enter the main hall uninvited. As in some of the best known Indonesian mosques where the entrance doors and boundary walls are guarded or manned by Hindu or Buddhist gods and goddesses. (The reverse also holds true. Some gods and goddesses do have a special symbolic place for anti-polytheism. Lord Thirupathi, the presiding deity nowadays of India's high politics and entertainment industry, reportedly has a Muslim son-in-law whose temple is right within the Lord's campus. And Sabarimala, one of the more potent deities in South India, is also known for his Muslim friend.) Gods and goddesses are not unknown even in starkly monotheistic religions. They may not be there centre stage, but they are waiting just outside the doors of consciousness. Most of the anger against *The Satanic Verses* was inspired by the gratuitous insults Rushdie heaped on some of Islam's revered figures, but part of it might also have been a response to the latent fear that the banished might return. The non-Islamic or pre-Islamic forms of consciousness that the book unwittingly invokes may or may not threaten 'mainstream' Islam, but they haunt many Islamic communities in those parts of the world where such forms are no longer one's distant, superseded past. Thanks to colonial constructions of 'true' Islam in the nineteenth century, this past often seems an immediate, destabilising temptation in the neighbourhood. It is probably no accident that the main agitation against *The Satanic Verses* took place in countries like Iran, Pakistan and India, and among expatriate Indian and Pakistanis in Britain.

Shamoon Lokhandwala mentions a medieval religious composition of Western Indian Muslims that depicts Prophet Muhammad as the last of the ten *avatars* and which served as a sacred text of the Muslims.<sup>6</sup> But even in the more austere monotheistic versions of Islam, gods and goddesses may survive as aspects or qualities of God, as in the ninety-nine names of Allah. Even in Judaism, despite the faith's hard monotheistic core, the dialogical relationship between God and humans in everyday life has many of the features of pantheistic faiths. In this relationship, much sarcasm, wit, accusations of partiality and injustice, light-hearted banter and sharp criticisms of the divine dispensation—of the kind that Vikram Savarkar did not relish—are common. They are neither seen as blasphemous nor as detracting from the majesty of the divine. Such dialogues can be found in old Judaic folk tales, contemporary Jewish writers, and even in extreme conditions, as shown by the recorded reactions of Jewish victims in Nazi concentration camps. Theological monotheism is not foolproof protection against theophily or attempts to fraternise with the sacred.

In South Asia, such dialogical relationships with divinity sometimes acquire oracular grandeur. Many know a story that philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi has made famous.<sup>7</sup> As he tells it, the famous religious leader and social reformer Vivekananda (1863–1902), while on a visit to Kashmir, went to a temple of the

goddess Kali and asked her what many self-conscious, westernised Hindus must have begun asking since the nineteenth century—why had she tolerated so much of vandalism and destruction of temples. Vivekananda heard in his heart the reply of the great mother goddess, ‘Do you protect me or do I protect you?’ Even the most fearsome deities in South Asia have, I like to believe, a double responsibility that they must balance—they have to protect both their devotees and the humanity of their devotees. The human responses gods and goddesses give to human predicaments may also be responses to the limited human ability to give or accept human answers grounded in secular reasons and secular morality. These responses may be another kind of self-examination represented by visions within the devotee where questions and answers are both latent in the devotee. In a cosmology dependent on gods and goddesses, it is a moral self-affirmation that can be simultaneously a rational argument.

A this-worldly articulation of the same process can be found in the Indian politician’s perpetual fascination with astrology, palmistry, *yajnas* or sacrificial rituals, and *Tantra*. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, for instance, undertook a series of pilgrimages during her last years. (She overdid it, some spitefully say, because her arithmetic was poor.) I have never heard of a politician, either in her party or in the opposition, who underestimated her rational, cost-calculating, political self. Nobody believed she would passively manage fate by depending on the good consequences of making the pilgrimages. She went to the pilgrimages, but retained her sharp, wily, ruthless political self. The issue of ‘agency’ in such matters is important but not simple. The heavens, though continuous with everyday life on earth, expect nobody to be passively dependent on them. They refuse to deliver results or confirm the belief that ‘agency’ has been transferred to the right quarters. This compact is fully understood by all the parties involved.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing shows this better than the art and science of astrology. Astrology is most popular in four sectors in South Asia: business (especially if it involves speculative ventures), spectator sports, the film world, and politics. However, I have never heard anyone claiming that the successful businesspersons of the region depend on astrology to solve their problems in the stock market. They do business to the best of their knowledge and understanding, *and* then take the help of astrologers, *tantriks* and temple priests to negotiate terms with gods and goddesses. As if astrology was merely another way of asking questions, guided by a vague awareness that the answers might be known to one but had to be endorsed by superhuman specialists.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when after elaborate rituals and consultations with astrologers, about eighty per cent of the nearly five hundred commercial films produced in India in a year routinely bomb at the box office, film producers or directors do not give up their belief in astrology. They blame the failure on their own imperfect reading of the future and flawed ritual performance. Presumably, modernity will now make sure that psychotherapists occupy the space that astrologers and priests, backed by gods and goddesses, now do. It will be in many ways a less colourful cultural life, but that is a different story.

When gods and goddesses enter human life in South Asia, they contaminate it not in the way the modern, sophisticated, urbane believer fears they will do.

Nor do they do so the way the rationalist thinks the idea of God dominates the lives of devotees. They enter human life to provide a quasi-human, sacred presence, to balance the powerful forces of desecralization in human relationships, vocations and nature. This familiarity has bred not contempt, as the Vikram Savarkars of the world suspect, but a certain self-confidence vis-à-vis deities. Gods and humans are not distant from each other; human beings can, if they try hard enough, approximate gods. They can even aspire to be more powerful and venerable than gods. *Tapas*, penance of various kinds, and sometimes even the benediction of one god, wisely or foolishly given, can give one superhuman, godly powers. First, spirituality is partly a gift of mortality; it is associated more with mortals than with gods, who are usually seen to have a streak of hedonism. The persistent asceticism of Shiva is an exception rather than the rule. Second, defying Vivekananda, some gods can also be vulnerable and require the help of humans to fight demons or other gods.

That is, the human inferiority to gods is not absolute; no wide chasm separates the goals and motivations of gods and humans. Indeed, the difference between immortal humans and gods occasionally become notional. For the classicists, this proposition is not difficult to swallow because, of the seven immortals mentioned in the *puranas* (Ashvathama, Bali, Vyasa, Hanumana, Kripa, Vibhishana and Parashurama), none, except perhaps Hanumana, can claim divine status.<sup>10</sup> There is continuity between the divine and the earthly; the chasm between gods and humans in South Asia is narrow or shifting. At times, some gods might even be less effective, potent or pious than humans.

May be that is the reason why allegiance to a deity is often personalized and looks like a bilateral contract or a secret intimacy between two unequal but sovereign individuals. This allegiance often may have little to do with one's faith, manifestly. Anybody who knows something about the great sarod players, Alauddin Khan and Ali Akbar Khan, will also know that both have been great devotees of goddess Saraswati. Yet, they have been simultaneously devout Muslims, and proudly so. That devotion to Islam and Islamic piety does not require them to reject their personal goddess or *isthadevi* who presides over the most important area of their life, musical creativity. Alauddin Khan once composed a new *raga* called Madanmanjari. As its name indicates, the *raga* immediately invokes Krishna and Vaishnava culture. When someone took courage to ask the Ustad why he had used such a blatantly Hindu name, the Ustad, I am told, was surprised. 'Is it Hindu? I composed it in honour of my wife Madina Begum', he is supposed to have said. What looked blatantly Hindu to some can look to others a marker of Islamic devotion. The piety of neither is disturbed.

While studying the Ramjanmabhumi movement, we found a hillock at Ayodhya, venerated both by local Hindus and Muslims. The Hindus considered it to be the discarded part of the sacred *Gandhamadan* of Ramayana, which Hanumana had foolishly carried, unable to locate the magical drug Vishalyakarani that he was told to find on the hill, for the treatment of Lakshmana's war wounds. The Muslims associated the same hillock with Hazrat Shish and considered it a remnant of Noah's ark, discarded of all places at Ayodhya, after the great deluge.

When gods and goddesses invade our personal life or enter it as our guests, when we give them our personal allegiance, they may or may not apparently have much to do with the generic faiths we profess. The theologian and painter Jyoti Shahi once reported a survey carried out in Madras where, according to official census, one per cent of the people are Christian. The survey found that about ten per cent of the population identified Jesus Christ as their personal god or *isthadevata*. Such data warn us not to be taken in by what some politicians, acting as vendors of piety, and some experts on ethnic violence tell us about the geography of faiths. The Indic civilization has been there slightly longer than the Hindutva-wallahs and the Indologists have been and it may well survive its well-wishers. The more continuous traditions of this civilization may reassert themselves in our public life. A majority of people in South Asia know how to handle the gods and goddesses, their own and that of others. The gods and goddesses, on the other hand, not only live with each other, they also invite us to live with their plural world.

Years ago, while studying the psychological landscape of western colonialism in South Asia, I checked some nineteenth-century documents on Calcutta, because Calcutta is where it all began. Not being a historian, many of the documents surprised me. For instance, certain scrappy details of British households showed that they had a large retinue of servants and retainers, including often a Brahmin priest who did *puja* in the house. Many of the British houses also had small temples which the Brahmin retainers took care of. Apparently, these householders went to Church on Sundays, but found nothing inconsistent in the *puja* at home.<sup>11</sup> The standard reading, I guess, would be that the Indian wives or concubines of such Britishers in India—the Suez Canal was not yet dug and most British in India had Indian spouses—required this facility. However, something else also might have been involved. For the East India Company itself owned ‘shares’ in at least two temples. During important religious festivals, the army band went and played at these temples and the musketeers of the Company fired volleys in the air to celebrate the occasion. In return, the Company was given a share of donations made to the temple. It also seems that many individual British residents in India, while proclaiming their disbelief in the special spiritual skills of Brahmins and attack them as charlatans, were at the same time scared stiff by their possible magical abilities. At least some British householders maintained temples at their homes not because they were lapsed Christians or crypto-Hindus, but because they were afraid of local gods and Brahmins and did not want to antagonize them. This was their idea of buying an insurance policy in matters of the sacred. The apparently sharp theological distinctions between some religions may, in specific cultural contexts, observe the logic of complementary self-organization.

I have come to suspect that theistic worlds in South Asia observe a series of principles of mediation in their relationships with each other. These mediations ensure continuity and compatibility, but also a degree of anxiety, hostility and violence, though not perhaps distance or incomprehension. Whether the protagonists are Bosnian Muslims and Serbs in East Europe, Hutus and Tutsis in Africa, or Hindus and Muslims in South Asia, fractured familiarity can

breed contempt and venomous, genocidal passions. More so in a context of imminent massification, threatening cultural identities.

A respected Pakistani political analyst and journalist once claimed that the ultimate fear in many Pakistanis was that, if they come too close to India, they would be fitted in the Hindu social order, mostly in the lower orders of the caste hierarchy. India and Pakistan separated 50 years ago; there is hardly any Hindu left in Pakistan. Most Pakistanis have not even seen a single Hindu in their life; they have seen Hindus only in films and on television. Why then this anxiety? My Pakistani friend himself seemed perplexed, but insisted that there *was* this lurking fear in Pakistan that Hinduism was not something outside, but a vector within. Probably living in two complementary worlds—of legends, folk tales, rituals, marriage rites, music, crafts traditions and, even, some of the same superstitious, fears, gods and demons—also has its costs. Perhaps many of the anti-idolatrous faiths in South Asia—they include many Hindu sects, too—are not merely negations of the sphere of gods and goddesses, but also constitute a system of internal checks and balances. Perhaps our gods and goddesses also need such checks.

When another faith provides such a counterpoint or balancing principle, it no longer remains an alien faith or someone else's faith. You do not have to open an inter-faith or inter-cultural dialogue with such a faith, to conform to contemporary sensitivities. The dialogue already exists, waiting to be joined. Islam, for instance, by the very fact that it denies gods and goddesses, provides in South Asia a different kind of meaning-system that becomes accessible to people who want to defy the world of gods and goddesses while living within it. So even a threat of becoming a part of the Islamic order and disowning the Hindu pantheon, by, say, an oppressed Dalit, becomes a particular way of interacting with the pantheon. Islam in South Asia may mean going outside the sphere of gods and goddesses, but it may also mean renegotiating terms and conditions with one's traditional gods and goddesses. It can even mean renegotiating the social status of communities sharing an overlapping structure of sacredness. Many of the most famous temples of Ayodhya, the pilgrimage centre that has become a symbol of religious intolerance in South Asia today, were built with the help of land grants and tax exemptions given by the Shia Nawabs of Avadh in pre-colonial days. By being patrons of Ram temples, they were making a statement both on their position vis-à-vis the Ramanandis who dominated the sacred city and the Sunnis, constituting an important component of the Muslim community there. Likewise, B.R. Ambedkar, the Dalit leader and the author of India's Constitution, when he decided to convert to Buddhism along with a sizeable section of his followers, did so after much deliberation. It was not the standard Theravada Buddhism, with its abundance of deities that he chose, but a more austere Buddhism that, by being close to Islam and Christianity, would represent a sharper disjunction with Hinduism. By his conversion he was making a statement to the Hindu world.<sup>12</sup>

A more intense form of such inter-relationship is the South Asian version of multiculturalism which does not remain a cultural artefact, but gets telescoped into the self of the individual. Kumar Suresh Singh's survey of Indian communities shows that hundreds of communities in India can be classified as having

more than one 'religion'. (It is doubtful if these believers see themselves as having multiple religious identities; they define their Hinduism or Islam or Christianity in such a way that the symbols of sacredness of another faith acquire specific theological, cultural and familial status.) Thus, there are one hundred and sixteen communities that are both Hindu and Christian; at least thirty-five communities that are both Hindu and Muslim. Sant Fateh Singh, who fought for the cause of Khalistan was said to be a convert from Islam and a part of his family, I am told, remains Muslim, exactly as a part of the family of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, remains Hindu. L.K. Advani, a leader of what is reputed to be one of the world's largest fundamentalist formations, is probably the only one of his ilk to have publicly proclaimed that, in his personal religious sensitivities, he is closer to Sikhism than to his own faith, Hinduism. M.A. Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, which separated from India on grounds of religion, belonged to a Muslim community that, to many 'thorough-bred' Muslims, still look more Hindu than many Hindu communities. When he spoke of the Hindus and Muslims of South Asia being two nations by virtue of their faith and lifestyle, one wonders if he was not compensating for being part of community that many Gujarati Hindus and Jains did not even include among the Muslims till a few decades ago. In all these instances, I am not talking of recent converts retaining traces of their older faiths; I am speaking of identities that appear to be simultaneously Hindu and Muslim, culturally *and* theologically.

The Meos, too, while devout Muslims, trace their ancestry from the Mahabharatic clans and also often have Mahabharatic names.<sup>13</sup> But, after being victims in a series of communal riots that have taken place since the days of Partition, they have begun to feel that they can no longer live in two houses, that they will have to choose. And some of them have chosen to be Muslim in the sense in which the Tabligh and the Jamaat-e-Islami define Islam. Apart from their own tradition of Islam, that is the only other Islam available to them in contemporary India. Similarly, in the re-conversion programmes being run by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad clandestinely, the aim is to introduce the non-Hindus into the Hindu fold as so many low-status mimics of a shallow, neo-Brahminic Hinduism, because that is the only Hinduism the evangelists themselves know. This is a modern tragedy that we have not yet sensed and it effects hundreds of communities all over the region today: Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists. I think South Asia will be poorer if its rich, intricate tapestry of faiths gets destroyed through neglect or shrinks into six or seven standard, mutually exclusive faiths because, in the contemporary world, only such standard faiths enjoy respectability and political clout. It will simultaneously impoverish Hinduism, Islam and the other South Asian faiths.

I have said at the beginning that South Asian gods and goddesses, like their Hellenic counterparts, can sometimes be found on the wrong side of morality or law. The *puranas* and the *upakathas* are full of instances of how loyalty to and instrumental use of certain gods and goddesses can destroy a person or a community. The *vamachari* tradition is old in South Asia, and there are deities who have a special relationship with deviant social groups. Years ago, while

studying the nineteenth-century epidemic of sati in Bengal, I found out that the popular public worship of Kali (*sarvajanin puja*) became an important socio-religious festival in Eastern India only towards the end of the eighteenth century. Previously Kali—the fierce, violent, dark goddess of popular imagination—had been primarily the goddess of marginal groups such as robbers and thieves and some incarnations of her were associated with certain dangerous diseases.<sup>14</sup> These gave her an ambivalent status. Now, along with Durga, she precipitated out as one of Bengal's two presiding deities, benevolent even if treacherously or violently so, from the great traditional mother goddess of the region, Chandi. After the great famine of 1772 killed off one-third of the population of Bengal and the colonial political economy caused massive cultural dislocations, Kali continued as the goddess of the marginal groups (becoming for instance the presiding goddess of the Thugs ravaging the countryside and pilgrimage routes). But she also acquired a new connection. She gradually became the chosen deity of the anomic, culturally uprooted, urban, upwardly mobile, upper castes in greater Calcutta and areas heavily influenced by the British presence, where a new political economy and urban culture were ensuring the collapse of traditional social norms. Durga became a more benevolent incarnation of Chandi and gradually emerged as the most important deity in Bengal. This changing cartography of gods and goddesses, who can be benevolent but are also associated with the extra-social, the amoral and the criminal, gives an altogether different set of insights into cultural changes. It profiles the anxieties, fears and hopes of a society that neither a desiccated, formal study of theology and high culture yield nor any study of the more formal, better known deities. The trivial can often be a surer pathway to cultural insights.

To give another example, in 1994, during the last episode of plague in India, I discovered that, while there were goddesses for cholera and smallpox in large parts of India, there was probably no goddess for plague except probably in Karnataka. I wondered why this goddess, Pilague-amma, found a congenial abode only in that state and why she had that Anglicised name, as if she was a newcomer to the Indian scene. Could it be that plague was a pestilence that did not arouse crippling anxieties in most parts of India? Could it be a pestilence with which most Indians did not have to wrestle psychologically, except perhaps in the Western coastal towns in contact with merchant ships coming from West Asia, Africa and Europe—Mangalore, Cochin, Calicut, Goa, Bombay and Surat. I do not know. Perhaps there *are* goddesses corresponding to Pilague-amma in southern Gujarat and in Konkan; only I have not had the privilege of their *darshan* yet. Once again, the geography of popular religion gives one a clue to the reasons why plague in India has not triggered the imageries and passions it has in Europe since the medieval times and why the Indians have never fathomed the anxieties that incidents of plague in India arouse in some other parts of the world.

This brings us to a central feature of South Asian concepts of divinity: the intimate relationship between gods and goddesses, on the one hand, and demons, *rakshasas* and ogres, on the other. The *suras* and the *asuras*, the *adityas* and the *daityas*, the *devas* and the *danavas*, are all dialectically

interrelated; gods and goddesses cannot survive or be imagined—they are not even complete—without their counterpoints among the demonic.

The divine pantheon—populated by the good and the bad, the targets of right-handed worship and those associated with left-handedness, *vamachara*—is part of a larger cosmic order. The gods and goddesses are integrally related to the anti-gods or demons. No theory of violence, no metaphysics of evil in this part of the world, is complete unless it takes into account this relationship. The fuzzy boundaries of South Asian concepts of evil, the temporal and spatial limitations of the concept of *papa* (that distinguish it from the more ‘intense’ Judaeo-Christian concept of sin, which is more sharply defined but, paradoxically, expected to transcend space and time more easily) and the tolerance of diverse moral universes can be read as reflecting the inextricability of the ideas of the good, the divine and the godly from those of the evil, the desacralized and the ungodly. Appropriately, the mother of the gods and goddesses in mythic India, Aditi, is a sister of the mother of the demons, Diti, and in stories after stories there is an intricate, personalized, ambivalent relationship between gods and demons. Even Ravana, the fearsome Brahmarakshasa, the worst kind of rakshasa, is intertwined with Rama in the cosmic order as two approaches to the same divinity. Circumstances and accidents separate the approaches and in death is the contradiction resolved. By dying at the hands of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, Ravana reaches his personal god, Vishnu.<sup>15</sup> Even the gift of the great Indian thinkers, writers, and painters to sometimes turn gods into villains and demons into heroes, and the ability of the less Sanskritized sectors to erect temples to persons as ungodly as Duryodhana or as demonic as Hidimba carry a message. Devotees at such temples do not see them as temples of evil. Nor are such devotees parts of any cabal, eager to fulfil secret ambitions through ritualized Satanism (though that can happen on rare occasions). Rather, the worshippers seem to have an alternative idea of divinity in which Duryodhana has a place that in more respectable versions of the Mahabharata his popular cousins monopolize.

These permeable borders between gods and demons, between the definitions of what is sacred in everyday life and what is not, are a major source of social tolerance and of the tacit awareness that the evil excluded from the self cannot be entirely projected outwards. For such projected evil remains only apparently outside, at a safe distance from the self. Indeed, the godliness one acknowledges and the ungodliness one is forced to acknowledge are ordered within as two sets of potentialities. They supply the culture’s distinctive theories of violence and oppression. The politics of confrontation does not go far in India because, as an aging radical activist told me some years ago, ‘the people are like that!’ But, people are like that because there is a cosmology to back them up. That cosmology textures and configures the good and the evil differently. These configurations—and the moral ambiguity that can go with it—deeply offended even a compassionate observer like Albert Schweitzer who believed that such a cosmology was morally flawed because it did not clearly separate good and evil. Schweitzer felt that some forms of social intervention and altruism were just not possible in such a frame of morality.<sup>16</sup> Maybe he was right. But that limitation also ensures that some forms of violence, based on the absolutization of

differences, are not easy to precipitate in South Asia. In the long run, all attempts to draw conclusive, non-equivocal lines between the insiders and the outsiders, between the godly and the ungodly, seem eventually doomed in the region. Even during the fearsome communal violence during the partitioning of British India, the killings were often interspersed by resistance and mutual help that crossed religious borders, for these borders were never absolute.

Can this interpretation be read as an instance of camouflaged cultural nationalism? ‘Why have all the *avatars* been born in India, nowhere else?’, an academic once asked me aggressively. Answers to such questions can only be as clear—or vague—as a culture insists on giving. There are many versions of popular Hinduism: there are roughly 330 million gods and some of their *avatars* might have been born elsewhere in the world. At least one important one, I know, was born in Nepal, at Lumbini. A proper census of these 330 million gods and goddesses and their countless incarnations is still waiting to be done.

Such questions are also partly answered every day by some of the apparent accidents of history, such as the existence of a city called Ayodhya in Thailand. Thai Ayodhya is not only sacred, it is unlikely that the Thais will concede it to be a copy of Indian Ayodhya. Exactly as Tamilians are unlikely to concede that Madurai is only a derivative of Mathura. Once however you historicize Rama, once you locate his birthplace at a particular Ayodhya at a particular point of time, either to territorialize his claim to a temple or to oppose it, you automatically deny or diminish the sacredness of the other Ayodhya and, while you may establish Rama as a national hero, you cannot sustain his status as a god who, as a god, has to exist *today*. If Rama *was* only a historical figure, he cannot be the Rama of the spiritual traditions of India. That is the paradox in which one gets caught when one accepts the language of the Hindutva-hawkers and the secular fundamentalists.

There is also the question Nagaraj raises about the status relations between the Brahminic and the non-Brahminic deities. Nirmal Kumar Bose wrote years ago about the South Asian stratarthy of gods, based on the caste system;<sup>17</sup> and M.N. Srinivas discussed the issue more than thirty years ago, though as a problem of ethnographic versus textual reality. For he had noticed in his work that it was not unusual for the learned to attribute qualities to a deity that others would not; that even for Sanskritic deities, the qualities associated with them in the Vedas and the Puranas were not often relevant in the field.<sup>18</sup> This sanctions a distinctive politics of cultures, perhaps even some play in matters of spirituality. First, the higher the status of a deity, the less directly helpful and relevant in everyday life he or she usually is.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Indra, the king of gods, has a high status in the pantheon, but his potency as a god relevant to our day-to-day existence is not particularly high, not at least in our times. Likewise with Brahma, the creator of the universe. Hindu temples within the precincts of most Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka tell the same story. Devotees see the Buddhist divinity as too austere and otherworldly; for everyday purposes, they prefer to deal with more amenable, lower-ranked Hindu deities. The stratarthy balances the Brahminic and the non-Brahminic, the greater Sanskritic and the local, the Buddhist and the Hindu.<sup>20</sup>

One's manifest loyalty to a deity, too, may not say much about the powers one imputes to the deity. Thirty-five years ago, when I joined a psychoanalytic research centre and clinic at Ahmedabad, most of the patients who came to the clinic were upper-caste Gujarati Vaishnavas. Ahmedabad itself was then an identifiably Vaishnava city, a sharp contrast to my native Calcutta. My teacher, the psychoanalyst Shiv Kumar Mitra, however, pointed out to me that the Vaishnava style overlay a clear Shakto substratum, with its usual bevy of powerful mother goddesses. When confronted with serious illness or financial crisis, many residents of Ahmedabad rushed to these goddesses. Popular temples in normal times were not necessarily the same as temples popular at times of crisis.

There can also be a hierarchy of godliness according to lifecycle. Some gods are more divine as children than as adults. Krishna, the king in the Mahabharata, is a god all right, but not a god of the same stature as he is as the child-god Balakrishna of the Bhagavata. Exactly as the status of the temple of Bhadrakali at Ahmedabad tells us something about the status of women in Gujarati society, the status of Balakrishna is a statement on childhood in India.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Rama as a raja may have one set of devotees; Rama as an *avatara* of Vishnu has another. While working at Ayodhya in 1990–92, I was surprised to find a section of the priests there convinced that the Ramjanmabhumi movement was a Shaivite plot to take over the pilgrimage centre. With the whole of India on fire on the Ramjanmabhumi issue, some priests insisted that the movement was a political ploy to defeat not the Muslims, but the Vaishnavas. A few of them openly expressed their displeasure that the leaders of the movement, especially the firebrand Shaivite *sannyasins* like Uma Bharati and Sadhui Ritambhara, talked of Rama primarily as a king.

If there are checks and balances within the pantheon in terms of power, interpersonal relations, status, morality and their following, there are human checks, too, against gods and goddesses, too. Not only in the form of pious men, women and children with unblemished records of penance whose spiritual powers make gods tremble, but also in the form of heroic, epic, if flawed figures and ordinary folk who take a position against mighty gods on moral grounds. Karna's defiance of fate and his disarming by Indra, Chand Saudagar's defiance of the goddess Chandi and her jealous, revenge against him and his family, are instances. Parents in Mithila even today reportedly refuse to allow their daughters to marry someone from Ayodhya, however eligible the prospective bridegroom (because of the ill-treatment of Sita by Rama and the residents of Ayodhya). The practice has lasted for centuries and may outlast the Hindu nationalist politicians shouting themselves hoarse about Ram being a national hero or affirming the unity and homogeneity of the Hindu nation. I am sure there are devotees of Rama who support the Ramjanmabhumi movement and vote for the Hindu nationalists in elections, yet would not like their daughters to marry someone from Ayodhya. Is this refusal only comic folk superstition, or is there in this obstinacy an embedded comment on the limits of the spiritual and moral status of Rama or, for that matter, gods and goddesses in general? Do we have access to the complexity of such discriminations and loyalties?

Finally, the matter of birth and death of gods and goddesses. New gods and goddesses are regularly born in South Asia.<sup>22</sup> They also die frequently, despite

their theoretical immortality. They die not of illness or accidents but of forgetfulness or deliberate erasure. These diseases are not uniquely South Asian; they are becoming epidemic the world over. Iconoclasm has killed fewer gods than has erasure or reconfiguration of memory. Certainly, evangelical Christianity between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century could not, despite its best efforts, manage to finish off gods and goddesses—coming from a Christian family, I know how much my family lived with them, while aggressively denying that they did. And mine was not an atypical Christian family.<sup>23</sup> My father's Christ, in retrospect, was remarkably Vaishnava. Official Christianity need not be the last word on Christianity, which Gandhi recognized in his wry comment that Christianity was a good religion before it went to Europe. There are Christian sects and denominations that have made systematic *theological* deals with vernacular concepts of divinity. Most religions probably know how to live with each other; probably it is the turn of some of the religious to re-learn how to live with each other.

While gods and goddesses *are* mainly responsible to their devotees, not to outsiders scrutinizing them 'scientifically,' even for such outsiders they often faithfully hold in trust, on behalf of their future generations, parts of the selves the devotees disown and would like to jettison. Gods and goddesses do get born, they live and die, but that birth, life and death record not only what they are, but also what we are. The historian of religion, Michio Araki claims that the premodern Japan we know is not the Japan that encountered the West in Meiji times, for Japan only theoretically escaped colonization. With two great civilizations, India and China, succumbing to European powers in the neighbourhood, Japan has always lived with fears of being colonized and this has forced Japan to redefine even its traditions and its past. Araki adds that clues to what Japan was before the western encounter and before it retooled its self-definition cannot be found in available histories of Japan because, but in its popular religion.

Not being a believer, I have come to gods and goddesses through politics, mainly through the politics of knowledge and democratic participation. I am all too aware that the world of gods and goddesses with which we are acquainted will not die soon. For our gods and goddesses, like Vivekananda's Kali, can take care of themselves. However, there are other worlds of gods and goddesses that are facing extinction. These gods and goddesses are exiting the world stage silently, without any fanfare, lament or scholarly obituary.

Some years ago, I studied India's first environmental activist, Kapil Bhattacharjee (1904–1989), who opposed the Damodar Valley Corporation, the multi-purpose project of dams, hydel plants and irrigation systems modelled on the Tennessee Valley Authority or TVA. I arrived at the usual story—that when the DVC was built in the 1950s and 1960s, hundreds of thousands of people were uprooted, a majority of them tribals. They were given paltry compensations and told to settle elsewhere. And as usually happened during those tumultuous times in a newly born nation-state pathetically trying to catch up with the West, these displaced people went and quietly settled down elsewhere, lost touch with their past, their inherited skills and environmental sensitivities (the ecology of resettlement area being usually different). Mostly belonging to the non-monetized section of the Indian economy, they also quickly spent the money they received as compen-

sation on alcohol and fictitious land deals. Soon they became like any other uprooted community, migrant labourers working in small industrial units or landless agricultural labourers.<sup>24</sup> They were some of the earliest members of that growing community—an estimated fifty million Indians whom development has uprooted during the last fifty years. This is more than three times the number of people displaced during the Partition riots in 1946–48. People have not forgotten the sixteen million displaced by Partition but they have forgotten these fifty million. A large proportion of the displaced are tribals and Dalits; one-third of India's entire tribal population has been uprooted in the last fifty years and fifteen per cent of our tribes have been fully uprooted.<sup>25</sup> The gods and goddesses of these vanishing communities, silently facing extinction, are those that have made me aware of a divine species which, unlike Vivekananda's Kali, require something in addition to devotion. There are also communities that, after centuries of oppression, have begun to undervalue or forget their gods and goddesses (so that they can redefine themselves as only a group of oppressed poor, operating from a clean cultural slate).<sup>26</sup> I believe that all these gods and goddesses—as biographies of threatened cultures, as symbols of their resilience and resistance against the juggernaut of mega-development—deserve something more than standard, rationalist, dismissive ethnographies or archeologies. We owe something not only to them and their humble devotees but also to our own moral selves. For no intervention in society, politics and culture becomes moral because we cannot at the moment think of an alternative to it.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper began as an informal extempore presentation and answers to some questions raised by participants at a *sanskriti shivira* (workshop on cultural studies) on gods and goddesses, organised by Ninasam, Heggodu, Karnataka, 8–15 October 1995. Subsequently, K.V. Akshara and his associates painstakingly transcribed the lecture and my exchange with the participants for the Kannada readers. It was D.R. Nagaraj's persistent interest in the lecture that induced me to turn it into something resembling a proper paper. It was then delivered as a keynote address at the American Academy of Religion, New Orleans, 27–28 November 1996, and published in *Manushi*, March–April 1997 (99), pp. 5–19. A revised and expanded version was delivered as the Regents' Lecture at the University of California, Department of History on 1 May 1997 and will be published in Vinay Lal (ed.), *Dissenting Knowledges, Open Futures: The Multiple Selves and Strange Destinations of Ashis Nandy*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. I am grateful to Nagaraj, U.R. Anantha Murthy, Ganesh Devi, and the intellectually extremely alert, mostly non-academic participants in the *shivira* who, through their comments and criticisms, shaped this essay in the first place.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Roland, *In Search of Self in India and Japan: Toward a Cross-Cultural Psychology*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> As a distinguished, expatriate ethnomusicologist, oblivious of the new, city-sleek 'defenders of Hinduism' has recently put it, '... the Gods and Goddesses are neither remote nor really frightening or incomprehensible, as in many other religions. Their adventures are real enough for us to empathise with them, and what makes for this feeling of reality is that they not only maintain lofty principles but also have some of our own weaknesses and feelings.' Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy, *Hi-Tech Shiva and Other Apocryphal Stories: An Academic Allegory*, Van Nuys, CA: Apsara Media, 1990, pp. viii–ix. See also Surabhi Sheth, 'Self and Reality', in D.L. Sheth and Ashis Nandy (eds.), *The Future of Hinduism*, forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> In Malaysia and Indonesia, for instance, they critically influence the mythic life of a majority of the people. Under the influence of Islamic revivalism, in Malaysia, there are now stray attempts to purify Malaysian Islam and demands that the Malaysian sultans, who constitute a ruling council, to drop parts of their titles that are 'Hindu' and obvious remnants of pre-Islamic traditions. However, the sultans seem reluctant to do so, for a part of their legitimacy in a predominantly Muslim community, is linked to their ritual status. Gods

and goddesses can survive in odd places. See for instance Dilip Padgaonkar, 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai in Indonesia', *The Times of India*, 30 January 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 124.

<sup>6</sup> Shamoon T. Lokhandwala, 'Indian Islam: Composite Culture and Integration', *New Quest*, March–April 1985 (50), pp. 87–101.

<sup>7</sup> Ramchandra Gandhi, *Sita's Kitchen: A Testimony of Faith and Enquiry*, New Delhi: Eastern Wiley, 1994, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Tao of Cricket: On Games of Destiny and the Destiny of Games*, New Delhi: Penguin, 1989, Ch. 1.

<sup>9</sup> This part of the story is entirely missed by those who read all recourse to astrology as the denial of free will. For a recent example, see Peter R. deSouza, 'Astrology and the Indian State', *The Times of India*, 19 July 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Though I have recently found out that, in Sri Lanka, there is at least one temple where Vibhishana is worshipped. Of the seven immortals (*Ashvathama BalirVyaso Hanumanscha Vibhishanah Kripah Parashuramascha saptaita chiranjivinah*), Ashvathama is the best known, and, until some decades ago, one could hear claims once in a while that he had been seen still moving around with a wound on his forehead, usually at the foothills of the Himalayas. I have never been able to decipher this fondness for the hills in this tragic *puranic* character.

Despite of the unenviable state of the *puranic* immortals, immortality has been a major fantasy in Indian cultural life. Indian alchemy has been more concerned with the search for an elixir of life, less with the transmutation of base metals into gold.

<sup>11</sup> What arouses anxiety in modern Indians do not apparently do so in societies where the élite has not lost its cultural self confidence. I am told that it has become fashionable in recent years for young Japanese couples to get married in picturesque European churches. They get married there according to Christian rites and the marriages are perfectly acceptable in Japan, legally and socially. Has this openness something to do with the eight millions gods in Shinto cosmology?

<sup>12</sup> That ultimately things did not go the way Ambedkar thought they would go, and he himself had to end up as a part of the Buddhist–Hindu pantheon of the Dalits, is, of course, a different story.

<sup>13</sup> Shail Mayaram, *Resisting Regimes: Myth, Memory and the Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997; and 'Representing the Hindu-Muslim Civilisational Encounter: The Mahabharata of Community of Muslims', Jaipur: Institute of Development Studies, 1996.

<sup>14</sup> Some folk tales presume Olaichandi, for instance, to be a thinly disguised incarnation of Kali, who presided over cholera. Her Islamic edition was Olaibibi. Often, in a village or town, if Olaibibi was seen as more potent, the Hindus also went to her and vice versa. Exactly as many Muslims in Dhaka go to the Dhakeshwari temple for specific forms of protection or blessings. Dhakeshwari, some believe, still protects one from serious accidents and few among them want to take the risk of testing out the truth of that, not even in an Islamic society.

<sup>15</sup> So Michael Madhusudan Dutt's (1824–1873) great act of rebellion, his epic *Meghnadbadh Kavya* which makes a hero out of Ravana and a villain out of Rama, as in some of the earlier dissenting premodern Ramayanas, was after all not that disjunctive with the original as Dutt might have thought. I think I now know why, despite being taught, like all Bengalis, to hero worship Dutt, I could still enjoy my grandmother's conventional version of Ramayana.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *Indian Thought and its Development*, New York: Beacon, 1959.

<sup>17</sup> Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Culture and Society in India*, New Delhi: Asia, 1967.

<sup>18</sup> M. N. Srinivas, 'A Brief Note on Ayyappa, the South Indian Deity', in K.M. Kapadia (ed.), *Professor Ghurye Felicitation Volume*, Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1954, pp. 238–243.

<sup>19</sup> This also seems to indirectly emerge from Veena Das, 'The Mythological Film and its Framework of Meaning: An Analysis of Jai Santoshi Ma', *India International Centre Quarterly*, 9(1), 1981, pp. 43–56. There is a glimpse into the politics of the language the gods speak in 'Lingua Franca of Tamil Gods: Sanskrit or Tamil' *The Statesman*, 11 November 1990. Predictably, the Hindu nationalists have taken up the cause of Sanskrit.

<sup>20</sup> Appropriately enough, Simhala chauvinists have begun to interpret this expression of mutuality as an instance of contamination of Buddhism by Hinduism.

<sup>21</sup> Interested readers may look up Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983; 'Politics of Childhood', in *Traditions, Tyranny and Utopia: Essays in the Politics of Awareness*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 56–76.

<sup>22</sup> Veena Das gives a fascinating account of the birth of a god sired by commercial cinema; see Das, 'Jai Santoshi Ma'. Such entry into the pantheon can even be quite enduring. Only a few weeks ago, writing this paper, I chanced upon a temple at Madangir, New Delhi, which, to spite Das, claimed to be an ancient Santoshi Ma temple, *Prachin Santoshi Mata Mandir*.

<sup>23</sup> Probably gods have another kind of incarnation, not captured in any *avatara* theory. As we know, many of the European Christian saints, in their Latin American incarnations, bear clear imprints of

pre-Christian Aztec deities. Even the figure of Christ has been transformed into a Meso-American one, far removed from the standardized figure of Christ in European Christendom.

<sup>24</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'The Range and Limits of Dissent: Kapil Bhattacharjea's Critique of the DVC, Presented at the Conference on the Greening of Economics, Bellagio, 2-6 August 1993. To be published in Frédérique Apffel Marglin (Ed.), *People Count*, forthcoming.

<sup>25</sup> Smitu Kothari, estimates that of the sixty million aboriginal tribals in India belonging to some two hundred and twelve tribes, fifteen per cent have been displaced by development projects. Smitu Kothari, *Theorising Culture, Nature and Democracy in India*, Delhi: Lokayan, 1993, ms.

<sup>26</sup> Many Dalit communities in contemporary India are good examples of such deculturation. In response, some sensitive Dalit writers have made a conscious effort rediscover and defend Dalit cultural traditions. See for instance, D.R. Nagaraj, 'From Political Rage to Cultural Affirmation: Notes on the Kannada Dalit Poet-Activist Siddalingaiah', *India International Centre Quarterly*, 21(4), Winter 1994, pp. 15-26.