

## Hinduism (Siva and Visnu): God as Superhero - the Finite, Infinite Dialectic -

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ヒンズー教 (シバとビシュヌ)  
スーパーヒーローとしての神ー有限と無限の弁証法ー

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The theme of this paper is the dual nature of the Hindu divinities, as portrayed in the mythology. There are presented as human characters, with human weaknesses, but at the same time reveal divine attributes. These attributes justify the devotion they receive, yet that devotion is perhaps more likely to be inspired by the more comprehensible human aspect of their being.

I deal firstly with the fallibility of Brahma, Visnu and Siva, as presented in a story from the *Bhavisya Purana*. I proceed to an account of the relationship between Siva and Parvati in the *Saura* and *Skanda Puranas*, and how the God and Goddess are self-conscious of their unity of human and divine attributes. My next section deals with the figure of Krisna in the *Bhagavata Purana*; the love and devotion inspired by the child and youth, contrasted with the fear and trembling associated with the occasional theophanic revelation. The supreme example of this contrast occurs in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Here, the divine form of Krisna is incomprehensible to Arjuna in the text, and unimaginable to readers. For God to be represented at all in a way which we can appreciate we require some form of mythical or literary context, to locate our imaginations.

I end with a postscript discussing O'Flaherty's dichotomy of Order and Chaos, and her association of myth with the chaotic realm. This is appropriate, since myth reveals, and uses, the human need for mtable images of the divine..

### Key Words (キーワード)

Hinduism (ヒンズー教), Myth (神話), Literature (文献), Siva (シバ), Visnu (ビシュヌ).

Clark Kent is human. He wears glasses and writes articles for a newspaper. When he steps into a telephone box to change his clothes he comes out superhuman: he can fly; he can save the world. I don't want to dwell on Superman - he represents oly a very limited analogy to a mythological god-but he does exemplify one thing: the human need for imaginative figures who combine in their person aspects of both the *credible* and the *in-*

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credible. In the mythology Hindu gods are represented as superhumans who combine the worlds of the finite and the infinite. For much of the time they can appear largely ordinary, fellow-travellers in this conditioned world; now and again we are confronted by evidence of their transcendence: transfigurations; theophanies - the scales fall from our eyes and we see their glory. However, it is not that their human elements are somehow false, and their divine nature somehow The Truth. The human side of their character is equally important in understanding the power of the figure as a whole; and indispensable. Visnu destroyer-of-worlds is not entirely separate from Krisna butter-thief.

Somebody (C.S Lewis I think) once said that while it might sound entirely rational to describe God as a cosmic or universal or all-pervasive spirit the unfortunate effect of this description on the feeble human imagination is that we picture God as a vast tapioca pudding. We are not well equipped to deal with abstractions. We are left unsatisfied by the cold truths of the philosophers and scientists. We need gods we can relate to. So an important aspect of the divine beings of Hindu mythology is their believable human character - the pranks of the young Krisna; the emotional slanging-matches between Siva and Parvati. We warm to their apparent imperfections. At the same time, though, if they are to retain their status as gods (and not degenerate into the cast of an early soap-opera) they must have qualities which are larger-than-life. Krisna's flute and Siva's third eye are symbols by which we recognise their divine character and in which their power is concentrated. Such characteristics alone would raise them only to the status of demi-god or super-hero. But throughout the mythology we get further glimpses of the above and beyond; of how, through these characters, the finite opens into the infinite, and these beings, who once seemed so accessible, earn the title Supreme.

The dialectic between humanity and divinity, finite and infinite, takes different forms and operates in different ways, according to the god in question and the source of the myth. In this essay I want to focus closely on a few extracts and look at how the interplay between human and divine elements in these myths serves to create a total picture which the worshipper can use as a focus for devotion. I will base most of my account on extracts from W.D. O'Flaherty's *Hindu Myths*. I will begin with a story that appeals to me as, somewhat unusually, it illustrates the degradation of the gods rather than their exaltation. I will then move on to an examination of the relationship between Siva and Parvati, followed by some observations on the figure of the young Krisna, as exemplified in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Finally I will turn to the theophany in Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, with a particular interest in the literary difficulties that arise when human characteristics are put to one side and an attempt is made to look squarely at the Divine in its essence - Can it be done? Do we, as readers, experience an imaginative overload analagous to Arjuna's unbearable awe? This will, bopefully, lead to my conclusion - that just as Krisna has to veil his divinity in order to continue to communicate with Arjuna and impart his teaching, so all the Hindu gods necessarily appear in guises from which their true nature cannot be abstracted. We can't bear very much reality; or divine splendour. In order to make contact with us the gods must descend, or be brought down,

to our level. In doing so, the abstract is abandoned, the concrete embraced, and truth arises through the poetic medium of myth.

There is a story in the *Bhavisya Purana* of a sage and his wife (Atri and Anasuya) meditating beside the Ganges when they are approached by Brahma, Visnu and Siva. The gods initially greet the sage, but he is absorbed in contemplation and ignores them. So they turn to his wife, and find themselves immediately overcome with desire:

Rudra himself had a linga in his hand; Visnu was exhilarated with desire for her; Brahma's godhead was annulled by lust, and he was entirely in the power of Kama. He said, "Grant me sexual pleasure, or I will abandon my life's breath, for you have caused me to whirl about drunk with passion." (1)

She does not respond, so the gods, 'out of their minds', prepare to rape her:

...they were deluded by the Goddess's magic power.

Then the sage's beloved and faithful wife became angry and cursed them, saying, "You will be my sons, for you have been infatuated by desire. The linga of the great god, the great head of Brahma here, and the two feet of Vasudeva will always be worshipped by men, and so the supreme gods will be the supreme laughing-stock." (2)

In order to dispel the curse the three gods must become incarnate as Anasuya's 'little sons', the three yogis Candramas, Dattatreya and Durvasas.

This tale is a good example of how Hindu mythology operates using both/and logic rather than either/or. The supremacy of the gods would appear to be called into question at three essential points: they are victims of Kama/'the Goddess's magic power'; they are reduced to laughing-stocks; they are forced literally to descend, to become incarnate as yogis. A naively 'logical' reader would assume that, on all three counts, a reduction in status is proven. Yet the power of the tale resides in the fact that whatever happens the supremacy of these gods is assured. They are supreme *both* as gods *and* as laughing-stocks. The two positions are not, after all, mutually exclusive. The symbols by which they are ridiculed - linga, head, feet - are precisely those by which they are venerated.

Kama, sexual desire, is a force powerful enough in the experience of mortals to be accorded the rank of god in its own right. In the (rather loose) Hindu hierarchy Kama would nevertheless ordinarily be subordinate to Brahma, Visnu and Siva. Yet here these immortals reveal their fallibility; the extent to which they are out of control is indicated by their readiness to commit rape. Kama has an ally in the Goddess - it is suggested that it is her magic power that is responsible for their delusion. I suppose it is possible to offer the explanation that this tale is propaganda on behalf of the Goddess, indicating the extent to which the three gods are mere pawns under her control. That would resolve the paradox; however it is equally possible that the paradox is fundamental: the three gods are, at the same time, both exalted and humbled. The tale takes their exaltation as given and describes only their humiliation, which is emphasized by its conclusion. Since the

gods have behaved like irresponsible mortals they are forced to take on mortal existence to expiate the damage done. A further paradox is implicit here: to dispel the evil these yogic incarnations must presumably lead exemplary and strenuously ascetic lives - mortal yet perfect - the inverse of their immortality/imperfection in this myth. The three gods maintain three parallel and co-existing forms: their final mortal incarnations; their roles acting as 'drunk with passion' in the narrative; and their assumed transcendence which is coloured, caricatured, even mocked, but which somehow survives. The brave suggestion of the myth is that the ultimate-in-all-things must, by that token, be ultimately ridiculous. The myth stretches the imagination to encompass this extreme view, and reveals that no contradiction need be involved.

In another myth, from the *Saura Purana*, Siva appears in a more majestic aspect and, far from being a victim of Kama, actually destroys him. This tale begins when Brahma grants a boon to the demon Taraka, which is that he can only be slain by a child of Siva. Taraka proceeds to terrorize the gods and engages with Visnu in a fierce battle for 'thirty thousand years, day and night, without respite'. Eventually Visnu, realising that he cannot win, gives up, 'confused and worried'. It is then that the gods discover from Brahma the means by which Taraka can be defeated, and they despatch Kama to 'shake the mind of Hara and make him unite with Parvati'. Kama evades Nandin at Siva's door by taking the form of a cool, gentle southern breeze, and, coming into Siva's presence, he encounters Siva's glorious form:

...like ten million suns, with a thousand eyes and thousand bodies, the tall god with a blue neck, shining like ambrosia, adorned with the shining crescent moon, shining like pure crystal, like a smokless fire, the god whose favour is the cause of the birth, destruction and maintenance of the universe ... (3)

Kama is transfixed, standing staring for 'sixty million years' until Siva, becoming suspicious, sees him with his bow drawn and burns him 'by the fire from his eye'.

At this point we enter a dialogue between Siva and Parvati in which the almighty god to whom all things, just now, seemed possible, discovers his limitations. He asks what he can do for her: "Mistress of the gods, what is there that you cannot obtain when I am pleased?" (4) - and discovers that he has just rendered himself impotent to satisfy her one wish:

"Blue-necked god," answered Parvati, "now that Kama has been killed, what can I do with a boon from you today? For without Kama there can be between a man and woman no emotion which is like ten million suns. When emotion is destroyed, how could happiness be attained?" (5)

Thus Siva, incomplete without Parvati, discovers that their relationship is incomplete without Kama. For all their majesty they are not faceless, characterless forces, but a man and woman (albeit archetypal) with the needs of emotion and happiness. (It is interesting that Siva requires Parvati to draw attention to this need, as if the destruction wrought by his eye produced an emotional blindness). In this light the formula of

propitiation which follows

“... you should protect me. You are the eye of the universe; you are the lord of worlds. You create the universe and put it in order; you face in all directions ...”  
(6)

sounds a lot like a wife flattering her husband and bolstering his ego so that he can overcome his self-consciousness and error. She recognises the vital necessity of Kama:

“Great god ... let Kama live and heat the world. My lord, without Kama I do not request anything at all.” (7)

and Siva displays his potency by fulfilling her request, re-creating Kama in ‘a disembodied form’. As he does so he says to her he is doing it in order “to please you, lady with beautiful eyes”.

The myth, which began with a terrorising demon, combat with a god, and a council of all the gods, has turned into what looks like a sidetrack, a domestic difficulty. But this is no sidetrack at all, it is the heart of Hindu mythology. Siva and Parvati, in every nuance of their interaction, are the primal powers Purusa and Prakriti (8), Man and Woman, the divine embodied and complete only in the completeness of their relationship. Without her, Siva acts with power reminiscent of a ‘blind’ force of nature - he burns Kama, as he apologetically acknowledges, unintentionally (“this very form of my eye which has fire as its essence burnt him by itself.”). Parvati, so to speak, ‘earths’ their union, recognising their need of emotion and happiness, and encouraging Siva to use his power in a more controlled, constructive manner. From the point of view of the devotee, while the cosmic vision of Siva witnessed by Kama may inspire awe, love and devotion are more likely to be inspired by Siva and Parvati as they relate to each other. We come to the Man through the Woman; to the Woman through the Man; and through their union to a more satisfying vision of God than can be attained by symbolism alone.

The male and female aspects of reality are represented in a general sense by the symbols of the linga and yoni. In the mythology these aspects, through the persons of Siva and Parvati, can also be particularised and rendered vividly individual. One of the most dramatically successful ways of achieving this is to present the divine couple locked in an argument. In the *Skanda Purana* there is the tale of the destruction of the demon Adi, and of how the Goddess obtains a golden skin. In O’Flaherty’s version the tale begins with a gesture of casual intimacy, in a light mood suggesting that the Hindu concept of the divine includes room for a sense of humour: ‘Siva tossed his arm around the neck of ... the Goddess and spoke in jest to her’ (9). Perhaps because he is a peculiar character Siva’s idea of a joke is also peculiar. Again the emphasis is not on abstract notions of the divine, but on the gods being embodied. Siva observes a sensuous contrast in skin colour between himself and his wife, using the comparison of the crescent moon to the dark moon, and comments unkindly: “you offend my sight.” (10). Unsurprisingly, in human terms, the Goddess is upset, but do we normally consider it possible that an aspect of Ultimate Reality could be emotionally wounded?

she released her neck from Sarva's embrace, her eyes grew red with anger, her face was distorted in a frown ... (11)

Her self-defence reads more like an assertion of her womanly qualities than any transcendent perfection, and Siva's own perfection is explicitly called into question:

"I am not crooked ... nor am I irregular. You are patient enough with your own faults - and you are richly endowed with a veritable mine of faults ... there is no use in my living just to be insulted by a rogue." (12)

There is pain, bitterness and sarcasm in her language. Again the exalted one is experiencing humiliation; but the myth never descends entirely into the genre of domestic drama. When it continues, describing Siva as 'Hara, whose actions are hard to comprehend' (13) we aren't sure whether this refers to his human unpredictability or divine inscrutability. When he responds to the Goddess as "terrifying lady, brightly smiling one" (14) he could be both mollifying his lover and propitiating her as Kali. At the end of his speech he says: "Control your anger. I bow to you with my head, and I fold my palms in reverence to you" (15). We have a husband speaking with a slightly ironic smile and a devotee worshipping his Divine Mistress. The posture is described both as 'flattery' (of her humanity) and 'hymns of praise' (to her divinity). The Goddess remains angry because 'she had been touched on a sore spot' (16) which suggests a whole psychological history, with a beginning, middle and potential end, not someone eternal and immutable. Yet with Siva's own angry retort in the tiff we are reminded that he is the 'destroyer of the cities'. He says:

"Truly, the daughter is like her father in all her ways. Your heart is as hard to fathom as a cavern of Himalaya ... your cruelty comes from his rock; your inconsistency from his various trees; your crookedness from his winding rivers; and you are as difficult to enjoy carnally as snow." (17)

The apparently petulant you're-just-like-your-father has an added twist - that father is a mountain. He lists those of her qualities he finds difficult to deal with ('hard to fathom', 'cruelty', 'inconsistency', 'crookedness', 'difficult to enjoy') as if he were applying for marriage guidance; and yet each quality is derived from her divine origin. The two worlds are intertwined. She responds in kind, relating each of Siva's faults to specific aspects of his iconography:

"You speak with many tongues because of your serpents; and you are devoid of affection because of your ashes. Your heart is defiled by the moon which is stained with a hare, and you get your stupidity from your bull ... You are frightening because you live in the burning-ground, and you have no modesty, because you are naked. You are disgusting, because you carry a skull; who could bear you thus?" (18)

There is an irony in this conclusion. The Goddess is speaking from a position of strength, because she presumably knows the answer to her rhetorical question. She has power over him. She is the only woman who can find this weird man lovable; the only Goddess who can bear his awesome power: 'no woman except Parvati would be able to

hold the *linga* of Siva.' (19).

Her speech makes it clear that we are not witnessing some sort of puppet show in which the characters retain nothing but their names to indicate their original status. On the contrary, there are reminders of their divinity at every turn; it is woven into the texture of the argument.

Along with each of the listed attributes, which extend and particularise our image of the god, is the notion of an appropriate human fault which serves to add character, especially when expressed as an accusation by the spouse. Their ascetic peculiarities ensure that there is no danger of their being reduced to the level of merely any old (un)happy couple. But our image of them as a couple is made far more realistic by this interaction. The archetypes of male and female represent not merely an algebraic truth, but a poetic truth in which emotions run high and where every detail of the argument has a potential story attached.

The other great god, Visnu, is nothing if not mutable. His avatars include those of fish, tortoise, boar and dwarf. In each case a relatively humble appearance conceals a divine reality. This concealment allows the god the element of surprise, as when the dwarf suddenly transforms into a giant, to encompass the world in three strides. In Visnu's avatar of Rama his divinity is hidden so thoroughly that Rama is largely unaware of it himself. Rama is an epic hero whose stature is such that it seems necessary to explain him as being Visnu: his divinity looks like an accretion, rather than being integral to the conception of his character. With Krisna, however, the divinity is self-aware; his actions are not 'innocent' and every so often, either intentionally or apparently unintentionally, the disguise slips.

It is very difficult to imagine Siva as a child - the image of the ash-smeared ascetic seems fundamentally adult. Yet Visnu, in Krisna, becomes a child, and revels in his childhood. As Krisna takes joy in his existence, so those close to him rejoice in him and in doing so they act as models for the devotee. Before they have learned to walk Krisna and Balarama express their joy crawling and rolling in the pasture mud. Yet just because he is divine it doesn't mean he emerged from the womb unnaturally independent; when they stray too far they become 'suddenly bewildered and frightened' and 'hasten back to their mothers'. The charms of both dependence and un-self-consciousness render them deeply endearing:

Their mothers' breasts would flow with milk out of tenderness for their own sons, whose bodies were beautifully covered with mud. (20)

Divine perfection here means Krisna becomes perfect as a *child*. To remain credible, and therefore attractive, he must not display extremes of either superhuman power or 'good behaviour'. He is loved not for any miraculous tendencies but for his old-fashioned 'naughtiness' and exuberance. (Perhaps vitality is more central than virtue to the Hindu concept of God):

They would grab hold of the tails of the calves and be dragged back and forth in

the pasture, and the women would look at them and forget their housework and laugh merrily. (21)

and "He devises ways to steal and eat curds and milk and thinks food sweet only if he steals it." (22). This playfulness is central to the total conception of the avatar. Not only is it how Krisna conducts himself in the world, it is also the spirit in which Visnu becomes incarnate in the first place. Krisna's being, from the beginning, is a form of game: 'Hari, the god of unchallenged sovereignty ... had in sport taken the form of a human child.' (23). The Purana uses this expression at the point in the tale where Krisna is accused of having eaten dirt. Displaying either precociousness or divine self-assurance Krisna challenges his mother (Yasoda) to check the story by looking for herself inside his mouth. The result is a stripping away of 'illusion' and a revelation of 'reality':

She then saw in his mouth the whole eternal universe, and heaven, and the regions of the sky, and the orb of the earth with its mountains, islands and oceans; she saw the wind, and lightning, and the moon and stars, and the zodiac; and water and fire and air and space itself; she saw the vacillating senses, the mind, the elements, and the three strands of matter. She saw within the body of her son, in his gaping mouth, the whole universe in all its variety, with all the forms of life and time and nature and action and hopes, and her own village, and herself. (24)

Her response, of course, is fear and confusion, and Krisna/Visnu has to show compassion by causing her to forget the vision and spreading the 'magic illusion' of 'maternal affection' beneath the power of which she once more loves him as her son. Divine and human aspects are not mutually exclusive, they co-exist. Sometimes the stress is on one, sometimes on the other. But the devotion that is felt for him is felt for, or at least through, his humanity. As a child, and particularly the lively child that he is, he becomes accessible, lovable. As Visnu he is beyond the grasp of the mortal mind; as Krisna he can be held in his mother's arms:

She considered Hari - whose greatness is extolled by the three Vedas and the Upanisads and the philosophies of Sankhya and yoga and all the Satvata texts - she considered him to be her son. (25)

As Krisna grows up his proclivity for pranks continues, but rather than charming the village women into motherly tenderness he now stimulates erotic excitement among the cow-herd girls. There is no thought that this excitement is somehow unsuitable as a metaphor for the feeling of the devotee for God. Instead it succeeds in conveying the urgency of this feeling, which would be absent in a picture of cooler, calmer contemplation. Once the equation is made between the cow-herd girls and the devotee the stories concerning Krisna and these girls become immediately susceptible to symbolic interpretation. My point is that the stories are not dispensable; they are not merely 'added colour'. Rather, the stories create the devotion they describe and the total picture of that devotion is obtainable only through the medium of the myth.

When the girls take off their clothes and play 'joyfully' in the river, 'singing about Krisna', they are not expressing a merely conventional attitude to the 'lord of all masters



of yoga'. Behind their joy is the history of Krisna in the Purana, the delight that he has communicated throughout his childhood and youth, which renders their singing, to anyone who has followed the myth thus far, entirely explicable. The Purana treats its own symbolic possibilities not with solemnity but with light irony. So the ostensibly solemn '[He] came there ... in order to grant them the objection of their rites' (26) is immediately sent-up, as it were, by its realisation:

He took their clothes and quickly climbed a Nipa tree ... "Girls, let each one of you come here and take her own clothes as she wishes. I promise you this is no jest."  
(27)

The girls' vows of love are in earnest; their devotion is earnest; yet Krisna, in accepting, turns the fulfilment into an erotic game. Seriously he grants what they seek, but in a jesting manner. Before God each one of us is vulnerable; as it stands that is a somewhat colourless assertion, but it receives vivid expression in the picture of the girls emerging naked and shivering from the river, approaching the object of their desire with tentative embarrassment. Again Krisna uses a mock-religious command in order to encourage the girls to place their hands on their heads and reveal their full nakedness. His behaviour is at once loving, light-hearted and masterly; the girls are completely enthralled. The myth lives in the imagination, engages the senses and embodies God. It doesn't merely relate the power of God, it demonstrates it. The reader is not convinced rationally of Krisna's divinity so much as charmed into acceptance.

The more the gods resemble ourselves, the easier it is to approach them unafraid. If they are approachable, we can warm to them. Left alone with either Siva or Goddess we might, indeed, be terrified, but the myths show them as they are in each other's eyes, a perspective which cuts them down to a more manageable scale. In the case of Krisna we see him as a child cradled by his mother and as a young man in the adoring gaze of his army of girlfriends. We might know, in the back of our minds, that he is God, but the prospect doesn't daunt us as much as it might if he was permanently stood on his dignity. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but it is also the end of wisdom if we remain too afraid to venture any closer. If we are to come into contact with God he must come among us in an accessible form. The myths give us such forms, enlivening the personalities of the gods with a human touch.

In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krisna appears as cousin and chariot-driver to Arjuna, an equal temporarily in the role of servant. His speech, however, makes it clear that ultimately Arjuna must serve him, both in the immediate circumstances by riding into battle and also more generally by following the path of devotion. Arjuna accepts Krisna's teaching, but to satisfy either his curiosity or his thirst for religious experience, he requests that Krisna divest himself of his disguise and appear to him in his true celestial form. Krisna complies. What follows is mind-blowing; I give only a snippet:

"Gazing upon your mighty form with its myriad mouths, eyes, arms, thighs, feet, bellies, and sharp, gruesome tusks, the worlds [all] shudder [in affright], - how

much more I! Ablaze with many-coloured [flames] You touch the sky, your mouths wide open, [gaping,] your eyes distended, blazing: so do I see You and my inmost self is shaken: I cannot bear it, I find no peace, O Vishnu!" (28)

Shocked out of his complacency Arjuna appreciates the terrifying irony implicit in his previous treatment of Krisna as an equal:

"How rashly have I called You comrade, for so I thought of You, [how rashly said,] 'Hey Krishna, hey Yadava, hey comrade!'. Little did I know of this your majesty; distraught was I ...or was it that I loved You? Sometimes in jest I showed You disrespect as we played or rested or sat or ate at table, sometimes together, sometimes in sight of others: I crave your pardon, O [Lord,] unfathomable, unfallen!" (29)

It is only by the grace of Krisna in the first place that Arjuna has been granted this vision; now he must crave that he remove the vision by the same grace since it is too awesome to deal with or withstand:

"Things never seen before have I seen, and ecstatic is my joy; yet fear-and-trembling perturbo my mind. Show me then, God, that [same human] form [I knew]; have mercy, Lord of gods, home of the universe!" (30)

Whatever else, the theophany is magnificent literature. Reading it we are transfixed, as Kama confronted by Siva, or Yasoda gazing into the infant Krisna's mouth. We know something of how Arjuna feels. Infinite and eternal perspectives open up, along with the inexorability of time, the finality of death, and the blood-and-gory essence of life. But what can we do with all this except bow in humble adoration and close in terror our newly-opened eyes? Put simply, Krisna as the almighty Visnu is out of our league. As mere mortals we are as powerless to affect or disturb him as we are the Fate or Time he represents. Nor can we hold the vision in our mind's eye. Much of the force of this chapter may indeed come from the unimaginability of Krisna's cosmic form. The description succeeds in overwhelming us. What it can't do is give us something we can grasp - how many eyes are there? how many mouths? how many arms? what sort of scale are we talking about? is it located somewhere in space, or is it all taking place inside Arjuna's head? We are left mightily impressed by the spectacle, but dumbfounded. This is not the sort of God you can engage in dialogue; Krisna must resume his mundane form before any constructive conversation with Arjuna can continue.

As a theophany this is not unique, even for Krisna in the *Mahabharata*, (31) though it is, perhaps, the supreme example of its kind. As we have seen, the child-Krisna of the Puranas also, from time to time, reveals the truth about himself in a similar manner. Siva, too, has his moments, though since he tends to operate in a more purely mythical and less epic-legendary environment the sense of contrast is less marked and the revelation correspondingly less spectacular. Something of the kind is surely necessary for any god aspiring to command monotheistic worship; he must, after all, represent the sum total of our experience as well as our hopes, fears and aspirations; though this is not to belittle the literary achievement of both the Gita and Puranas in giving us visions so

compelling. But perhaps a greater achievement is in giving us forms of the Supreme which are relatively homely. The teophanies may create faith; the veiled forms of God inspire love, whether this be through the antics and sheer vitality of the young Krisna or the ideal (and yet so credibly real) marriage of Siva and Parvati. The myths encourage a devotion which is a powerful mix of awe, respect, affection and erotic feeling. We are even allowed, at times, a sight of their failings, as when Parvati catalogues Siva's faults, or when Krisna in the *Mahabharata* persuades Yudishtira to lie and comes out clearly as his moral inferior (32). (Perfection is boring whereas imperfections enhance character).

In the end no one-sided description of the divine will do, from whatever point of view. The world is multi-faceted; how much more so then must be its Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer. We have to employ an inclusive, not an exclusive, logic if we want to hold these various facets in our minds. Siva is the linga; the Goddess is the yoni; but neither is reducible to the symbol. In the case of Krisna, even the cosmic form of Visnu constitutes, by itself, a reduction; Krisna with his personal history, timebound as it is, somehow enlarges on the timeless. The myths breathe life into the gods and give our imaginations something to bite on - a rich and varied portrayal of the supposedly ineffable Ultimate Reality.

As a kind of epilogue I wish to take one final look at the ways in which the mythological approach to reality differs from the philosophical. In her introduction to *Hindu Myths* O'Flaherty identifies these two approaches as opposite poles of a dichotomy which she also describes in three alternative ways as chaos/order; Dionysian/Apollonian (presumably derived from Nietzsche); and Eros/Thanatos (derived from Freud). One characteristic of the 'mythological-chaotic-Dionysian-Erotic' approach is that we can afford to be fairly loose about our attitude to such labels. There is no need to instigate a painstaking search for a neat system of exact correspondences. The advantage of myth over philosophy is that it has no hesitation in contradicting itself.

One of the characteristics of myth is fluidity. Thus the gods and goddesses each have a multiplicity of names, perhaps in recognition of the fact that no one description can encapsulate the reality. Sometimes an alternative name can shade off into a fully alternative conception of the divinity in question. Over time one god, Rudra, evolved into another, Siva; sometimes the names are used interchangeably. Kali can simply be an epithet of Parvati, or she can be effectively a separate goddess with her own unique iconography. This fluidity is an enactment of the simultaneous existence of monotheism and polytheism (and maybe also, even, monism, dualism and pantheism). Each new myth suggests a different answer to the Upanisadic question: 'How many gods are there *really*?' Given the universal form of Visnu or Siva there is clearly only room in the cosmos for one such god. But for the myths that is not the end of the matter. Another characteristic quality of myth is dynamism. However philosophically appealing the idea of a god as single, static, 'one who changes never' myth is never content to let him rest at that. God is shown in interaction ... with other gods and demons and mortals. Visnu, who is

Time, finds himself squeezed into the comparatively narrow confines of an epic, intimately involved in the gains and losses of mortal armies. To fluid and dynamic we must add erotic, not simply in the general Freudian sense, but using the term specifically. The union between Siva and Parvati has an erotic character which perhaps makes this picture a more accurate reflection of the underlying reality than the relatively dull image of the god or goddess standing alone. This drive toward relationship in turn affects the position of the devotee. Krisna is portrayed as always seeking out and encouraging worship. A philosophical account of the Supreme would have him as being above such humble feelings as loneliness, but Krisna certainly behaves as if he thirsts for connection with others. A final note on this score is that myth resists the philosophical tendency to de-sexualise the divine. God, in the myths, may be 'he' or 'she' but hardly ever 'it'.

O'Flaherty, in her introduction, notes a predominance of myths of birth and death. One characteristic of Hindu mythology is that death is so often the prelude to re-birth. There is also a high frequency of myths of transformation. The myth of the birth of Skanda describes Siva's seed being passed from one agent to another (Fire, to the Seven Sages Wives, to the mountain Himalaya, to the Ganges, to a clump of reeds) (33). The seed tortures these agents with unbearable 'feverish burning'. It is an image of vitality that cannot be controlled or contained. If this is, in some way, a reflection of reality itself, it is no surprise that the philosophic quest to describe life in forms of words proves endless. Myth is also a form of words, but used in a way which acknowledges fluidity, dynamism, eroticism, vitality. We are living inhabitants of a living universe. Our questions ('How many gods are there really? ... ?') require answers in a language equally alive.

## Notes

- ( 1 ) O'Flaherty (1975), p. 54
- ( 2 ) *ibid.* pp. 54-5
- ( 3 ) *ibid.* p. 157
- ( 4 ) *ibid.* p. 158
- ( 5 ) *ibid.*
- ( 6 ) *ibid.* p. 159
- ( 7 ) *ibid.*
- ( 8 ) cf. Kramrisch, p. 353; O'Flaherty (1982), p. 132
- ( 9 ) O'Flaherty (1975), p. 252
- (10) *ibid.*
- (11) *ibid.*
- (12) *ibid.* p. 253
- (13) *ibid.*
- (14) *ibid.*
- (15) *ibid.*
- (16) *ibid.*

- (17) *ibid.* pp. 253-4
- (18) *ibid.* p. 254; cf. O'Flaherty (1981), p. 225
- (19) Kramrisch, p. 242
- (20) O'Flaherty (1975), p. 219: cf. Tagare, p. 1301
- (21) *ibid.*
- (22) *ibid.*; cf. Tagare, p. 1302
- (23) *ibid.* p. 220; cf. Tagare, p. 1303
- (24) *ibid.*
- (25) *ibid.* p. 221; cf. Tagare, p. 1304
- (26) *ibid.* p. 229; cf. Tagare, p. 1396
- (27) *ibid.*
- (28) Zaehner (1969), p. 84
- (29) *ibid.* p. 85
- (30) *ibid.* p. 86
- (31) cf. Hiltebeitel, pp. 123-4
- (32) cf. Zaehner (1970), p. 154
- (33) O'Flaherty (1975), pp. 166-7

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