

Hinduism in the works of art, the slides, and the films which serve as a starting point for study and discussion. Such things are not merely "visual aids" in a learning process which is primarily textual. We should rather see them as "visual texts" which, like the books on our syllabus, require discussion, interpretation, and perhaps "rereading." Help can be found in the volume *Focus on Hinduism* (Anima Books, 1981), one of two key books in the series of which this volume was originally a part.

Certainly in the case of Indian art and images, such visual texts present their own perspective on the "Hindu tradition," and one that is not simply an "illustration" of what can already be learned from the rich textual traditions of Sanskrit. For those who would know something of how Hindus understand their own tradition, what is "written" in India's images certainly demands the same kind of careful attention to content and interpretation as might be devoted to what is written in India's scriptural tradition.

It was in seeing India — its arts, images, and landscapes — that I first was drawn to the study of Hinduism and Sanskrit. And of the many things I continue to find fascinating about Hinduism, it is the Hindu imagination with its vibrant capacity for image-making which is still at the source of it all. This book is written as a companion for those who want to "see" something of India, in the hope that what catches the eye may change our minds.

Diana Eck

CHAPTER

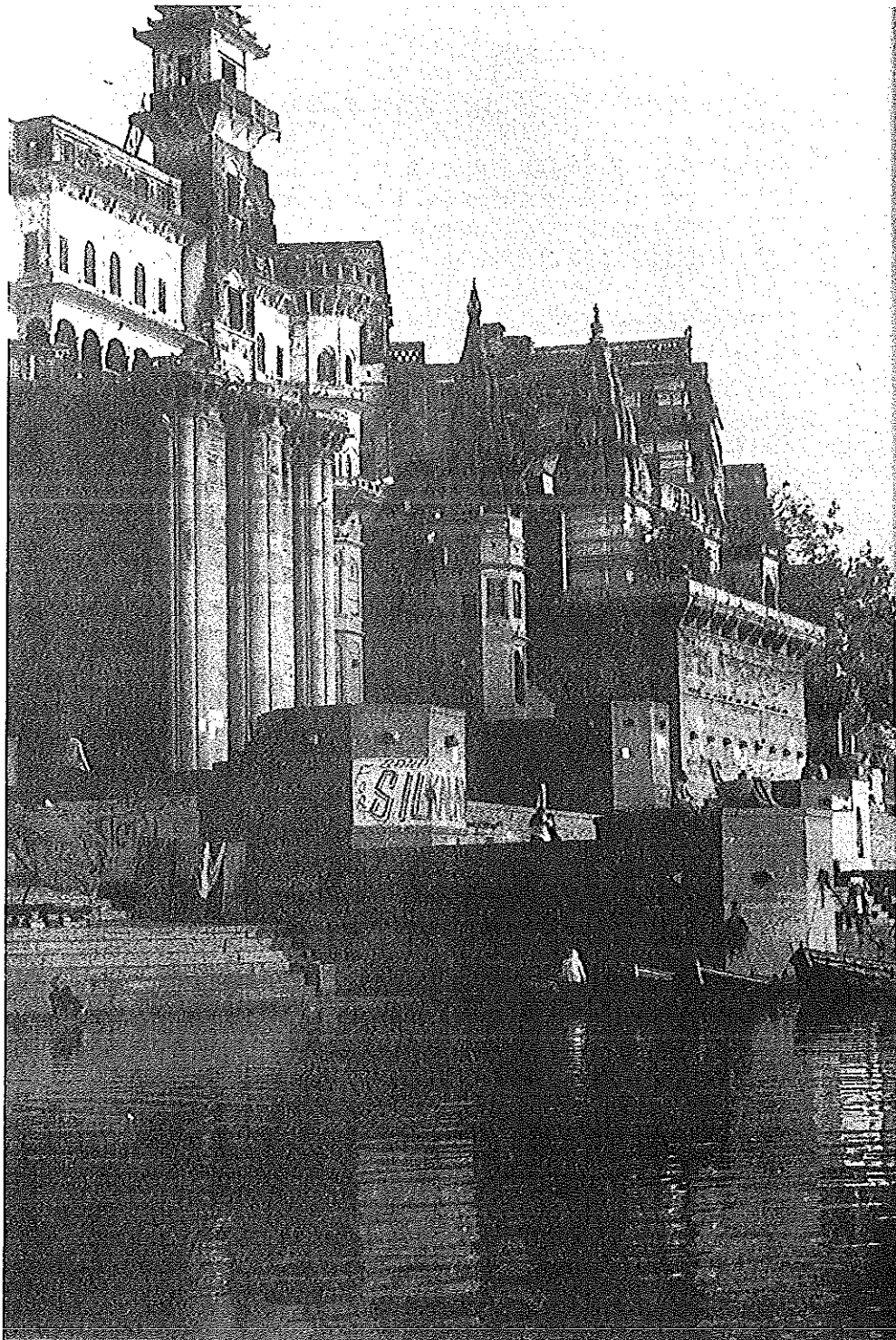
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Seeing the Sacred

A. Darśan

A COMMON SIGHT in India is a crowd of people gathered in the courtyard of a temple or at the doorway of a streetside shrine for the *darśan* of the deity. *Darśan* means "seeing." In the Hindu ritual tradition it refers especially to religious seeing, or the visual perception of the sacred. When Hindus go to a temple, they do not commonly say, "I am going to worship," but rather, "I am going for *darśan*." They go to "see" the image of the deity — be it Kṛṣṇa or Durgā, Śiva or Viṣṇu — present in the sanctum of the temple, and they go especially at those times of day when the image is most beautifully adorned with fresh flowers and when the curtain is drawn back so that the image is fully visible. The central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity. *Darśan* is sometimes translated as the "auspicious sight" of the divine, and its importance in the Hindu ritual complex reminds us that for Hindus "worship" is not only a matter of prayers and offerings and the devotional disposition of the heart. Since, in the Hindu understanding, the deity is present in the image, the visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning. Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine.

Similarly, when Hindus travel on pilgrimage, as they do by the millions each month of the year, it is for the *darśan* of the place of pilgrimage or for the *darśan* of its famous deities. They travel to Śiva's sacred city of Banāras for the *darśan* of Lord Viśvanāth. They trek high into the Himālayas for the *darśan* of Viṣṇu at Badrīnāth. Or they climb to the top of a hill in their own district



Munshi Ghāt, Banāras

for the *darśan* of a well-known local goddess. The pilgrims who take to the road on foot, or who crowd into buses and trains, are not merely sightseers, but "sacred sightseers" whose interest is not in the picturesque place, but in the powerful place where *darśan* may be had. These powerful places are called *tīrthas* (sacred "fords" or "crossings"), *dhāms* (divine "abodes"), or *pīthas* (the "benches" or "seats" of the divine). There are thousands of such places in India. Some, like Banāras (Vārāṇasī), which is also called Kāśī, are sought by pilgrims from their immediate locales.

Often such places of pilgrimage are famous for particular divine images, and so it is for the *darśan* of the image that pilgrims come. The close relationship between the symbolic importance of the image and the symbolic act of pilgrimage has been explored in a Western context by Victor and Edith Turner in *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*.¹ In the West, of course, such traditions of pilgrimage were often attacked by those who did not "see" the symbolic significance of images and who, like Erasmus, denounced the undertaking of pilgrimages as a waste of time. In the Hindu tradition, however, there has never been the confusion of "image" with "idol," and in India, pilgrimage is the natural extension of the desire for the *darśan* of the divine image, which is at the heart of all temple worship.

It is not only for the *darśan* of renowned images that Hindus have traveled as pilgrims. They also seek the *darśan* of the places themselves which are said to be the natural epiphanies of the divine: the peaks of the Himālayas, which are said to be the abode of the gods; the river Gaṅgā, which is said to fall from heaven to earth; or the many places which are associated with the mythic deeds of gods and goddesses, heroes and saints.

In addition to the *darśan* of temple images and sacred places, Hindus also value the *darśan* of holy persons, such as *sants* ("saints"), *sādhus* ("holy men"), and *sannyāsins* ("renouncers"). When Mahatma Gandhi traveled through India, tens of thousands of people would gather wherever he stopped in order to "take his *darśan*." Even if he did not stop, they would throng the train stations for a passing glimpse of the Mahatma in his compartment. Similarly, when Swami Karpātrī, a well-known *sannyāsīn* who is also a writer and political leader, would come to Vārāṇasī to spend the rainy season "retreat" period, people would flock to his daily



Painter putting finishing touches on the silver cap of the liṅga of Mahākāla in Ujjain

lectures not only to hear him, but to see him. However, even an ordinary *sannyāsin* or *sādhu* is held in esteem in traditional Hindu culture. He is a living symbol of the value placed upon renunciation, and he is a perpetual pilgrim who has left home and family for a homeless life. Villagers are eager for the *darśan* of such a person, approaching him with reverence and giving him food and hospitality. In *The Ochre Robe*, Agehananda Bharati writes, "There is absolutely no parallel to the conception of *darśan* in any religious act in the West. . . ."²

In popular terminology, Hindus say that the deity or the *sādhu* "gives *darśan*" (*darśan denā* is the Hindi expression), and the people "take *darśan*" (*darśan lenā*). What does this mean? What is given and what is taken? The very expression is arresting, for "seeing" in this religious sense is not an act which is initiated by the worshiper.³ Rather, the deity presents itself to be seen in its image, or the *sādhu* gives himself to be seen by the villagers. And the people "receive" their *darśan*. One might say that this "sacred perception," which is the ability truly to see the divine image, is given to the devotee, just as Arjuna is given the eyes with which to see Kṛṣṇa in the theophany described in the *Bhagavad Gītā*.⁴

The prominence of the eyes of Hindu divine images also reminds us that it is not only the worshiper who sees the deity, but the deity

sees the worshiper as well. The contact between devotee and deity is exchanged through the eyes. It is said in India that one of the ways in which the gods can be recognized when they move among people on this earth is by their unblinking eyes. Their gaze and their watchfulness is uninterrupted; Jan Gonda, in his detailed monograph *Eye and Gaze in the Veda*, has enumerated the many ways in which the powerful gaze of the gods was imagined and expressed even in a time before actual images of the gods were crafted.⁵ The eyes of Sūrya or Agni or Varuṇa are powerful and all-seeing, and the gods were entreated to look upon men with a kindly eye.

In the later Hindu tradition, when divine images began to be made, the eyes were the final part of the anthropomorphic image to be carved or set in place. Even after the breath of life (*prāṇa*) was established in the image there was the ceremony in which the eyes were ritually opened with a golden needle or with the final stroke of a paintbrush. This is still common practice in the consecration of images, and today shiny oversized enamel eyes may be set in the eye-sockets of the image during this rite. The gaze which falls from the newly-opened eyes of the deity is said to be so powerful that it must first fall upon some pleasing offering, such as sweets, or upon a mirror where it may see its own reflection. More than once has the tale been told of that powerful gaze falling upon some unwitting bystander, who died instantly of its force.⁶

Hindu divine images are often striking for their large and conspicuous eyes. The famous image of Kṛṣṇa Jagannāth in Purī has enormous saucer-like eyes.⁷ Śiva and Gaṇeśa are often depicted with a third vertical eye, set in the center of the forehead. Brahmā, inheriting the name "Thousand-Eyes" from Indra, is sometimes depicted with eyes all over his body, like leopard spots. While it would take us too far afield to explore the many dimensions of eye-power in the Hindu tradition, it is important for this study of the divine image to recognize that just as the glance of the inauspicious is thought to be dangerous and is referred to as the "evil eye," so is the glance of the auspicious person or the deity held to be profitable. When Hindus stand on tiptoe and crane their necks to see, through the crowd, the image of Lord Kṛṣṇa, they wish not only to "see," but to be seen. The gaze of the huge eyes of the image meets that of the worshiper, and that exchange of vision lies at the heart of Hindu worship.

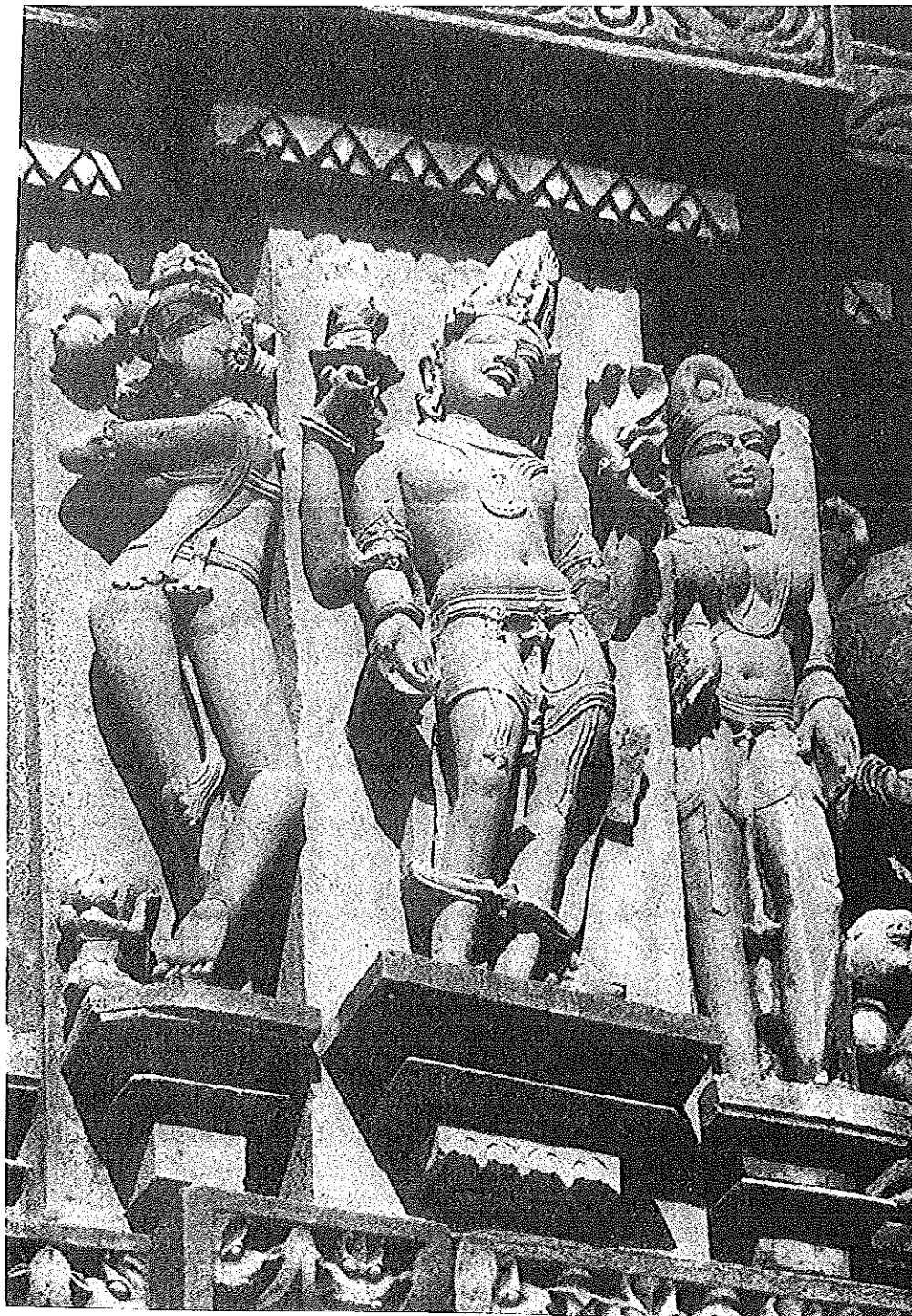
In the Indian context, seeing is a kind of touching. The art historian Stella Kramrisch writes,

Seeing, according to Indian notions, is a going forth of the sight towards the object. Sight touches it and acquires its form. Touch is the ultimate connection by which the visible yields to being grasped. While the eye touches the object, the vitality that pulsates in it is communicated. . . .⁸

Examining the words used in the Vedic literature, Gonda reaches the same conclusion: "That a look was consciously regarded as a form of contact appears from the combination of 'looking' and 'touching.' Casting one's eyes upon a person and touching him were related activities."⁹

Sanskrit poets and dramatists convey the subtleties of meaning expressed by the glances of the eyes, not only between lovers, but between husband and wife, whose public conversation was limited by rules of propriety.¹⁰ They communicated in their glances. Writes Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "One must suppose that the language of the eyes was more advanced in ancient India than it is with us."¹¹ Gonda reflects on the "language of the eyes" as it may pertain to the religious context: "It is indeed hardly conceivable that the psychological contact brought about, in normal social intercourse, by the eye, should not, consciously or unconsciously, have been made an element in a variety of rites and religious customs, that the positive fascination of a prolonged look, fixed regard or other manners of looking should not, in ritual practice also, be a means of expressing feelings, of imposing silence, of signifying consent or satisfaction, of expressing will, love or reverence, a means also of participating in the essence and nature of the person or object looked at."¹²

Not only is seeing a form of "touching," it is a form of knowing. According to the Brāhmaṇas, "The eye is the truth (*satyam*). If two persons were to come disputing with each other, . . . we should believe him who said 'I have seen it,' not him who has said 'I have heard it.'"¹³ Seeing is not only an activity of the eye, however. In India, as in many cultures, words for seeing have included within their semantic fields the notion of knowing. We speak of "seeing" the point of an argument, of "insight" into an issue of complexity, of the "vision" of people of wisdom. In Vedic India the "seers" were called *ṛṣis*. In their hymns, collected in the R̥g Veda, "to see" often



Śiva on Temples at Koṅāarak, Central North India

means a "mystical, supranatural beholding" or "visionary experiencing."¹⁴ Later on, the term *darśana* was used to describe the systems of philosophy which developed in the Indian tradition. However, it is misleading to think of these as "systems" or "schools" of philosophical thought. Rather, they are "points of view" which represent the varied phases of the truth viewed from different angles of vision."¹⁵

B. The Visible India

Hinduism is an imaginative, an "image-making," religious tradition in which the sacred is seen as present in the visible world — the world we see in multiple images and deities, in sacred places, and in people. The notion of *darśan* calls our attention, as students of Hinduism, to the fact that India is a visual and visionary culture, one in which the eyes have a prominent role in the apprehension of the sacred. For most ordinary Hindus, the notion of the divine as "invisible" would be foreign indeed. God is eminently visible, although human beings have not always had the refinement of sight to see. Furthermore, the divine is visible not only in temple and shrine, but also in the whole continuum of life — in nature, in people, in birth and growth and death. Although some Hindus, both philosophers and radical reformers, have always used the terms *nirguṇa* ("qualityless") and *nirākāra* ("formless") to speak of the One Brahman, this can most accurately be understood only from the perspective of a tradition that has simultaneously affirmed that Brahman is also *saguṇa* ("with qualities"), and that the multitude of "names and forms" of this world are the exuberant transformations of the One Brahman.

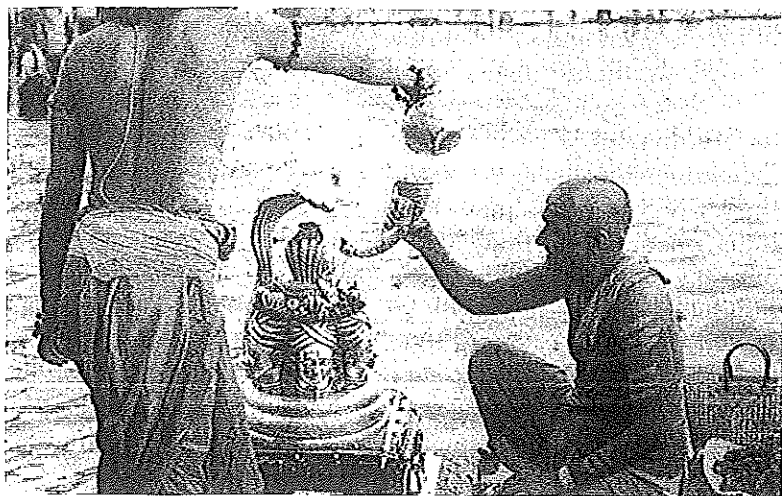
India presents to the visitor an overwhelmingly visual impression. It is beautiful, colorful, sensuous. It is captivating and intriguing, repugnant and puzzling. It combines the intimacy and familiarity of English four o'clock tea with the dazzling foreignness of carpsioned elephants or vast crowds bathing in the Gaṅgā during an eclipse. India's display of multi-armed images, its processions and pilgrimages, its beggars and kings, its street life and markets, its diversity of peoples — all appear to the eye in a kaleidoscope of images. Much that is removed from public view in the modern

West and taken into the privacy of rest homes, asylums, and institutions is open and visible in the life of an Indian city or village. The elderly, the infirm, the dead awaiting cremation — these sights, while they may have been expunged from the childhood palace of the Buddha, are not isolated from the public eye in India. Rather, they are present daily in the visible world in which Hindus, and those who visit India, move in the course of ordinary activities. In India, one sees everything. One sees people at work and at prayer; one sees plump, well-endowed merchants, simple renouncers, fraudulent "holy" men, frail widows, and emaciated lepers; one sees the festival procession, the marriage procession, and the funeral procession. Whatever Hindus affirm of the meaning of life, death, and suffering, they affirm with their eyes wide open.

So abundant are the data of the visual India, seen with the eye, that what one has learned from reading about "Hinduism" may seem pale and perhaps unrecognizable by comparison. As E. M. Forster wrote of the enterprise of studying Hinduism: "Study it for years with the best of teachers, and when you raise your head, nothing they have told you quite fits."¹⁶

The medium of film is especially important for the student of Hinduism, for it provides a way of entering the visual world, the world of sense and image, which is so important for the Hindu tradition. Raising the eye from the printed page to the street or the temple, as conveyed by the film, provides a new range of questions, a new set of data. In India's own terms, seeing is knowing. And India must be seen to be known. While Hindu spirituality is often portrayed in the West as interior, mystical, and other-worldly, one need only raise the head from the book to the image to see how mistakenly one-sided such a characterization is. The day to day life and ritual of Hindus is based not upon abstract interior truths, but upon the charged, concrete, and particular appearances of the divine in the substance of the material world.

Many Westerners, for example, upon seeing Hindu ritual observances for the first time, are impressed with how sensuous Hindu worship is. It is sensuous in that it makes full use of the senses — seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing. One "sees" the image of the deity (*darśan*). One "touches" it with one's hands (*sparśa*), and one also "touches" the limbs of one's own body to establish the presence of various deities (*nyāsa*). One "hears"



Offering the lamp of *arati* to the four-faced crown of Siva. By the tank of the River Godāvarī in Nāsik

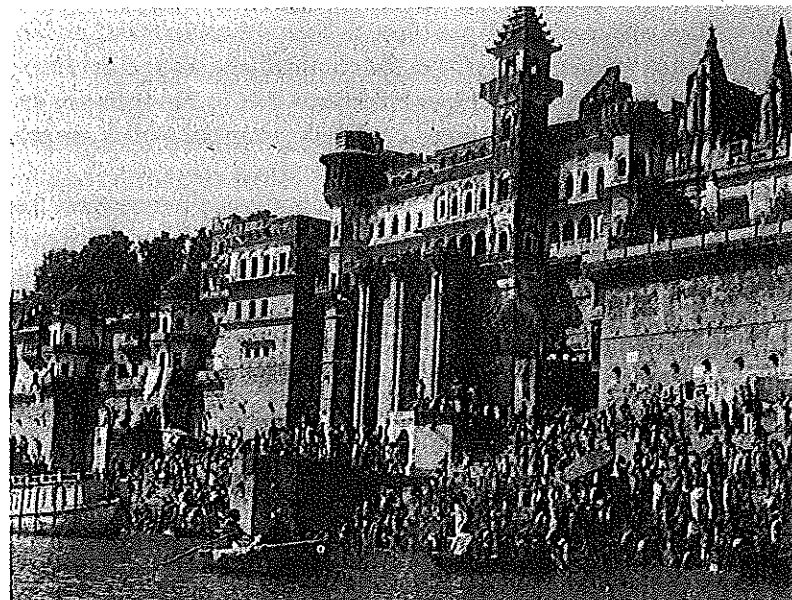
the sacred sound of the *mantras* (*śravaṇa*). The ringing of bells, the offering of oil lamps, the presentation of flowers, the pouring of water and milk, the sipping of sanctified liquid offerings, the eating of consecrated food — these are the basic constituents of Hindu worship, *pūjā*. For all of its famous otherworldliness, India is a culture that has also celebrated the life of this world and the realms of the senses.

C. Film Images

What do we mean by *image*? The term has been used variously in psychology, philosophy, religion, and the arts. For our purposes, there are two ways in which *image* is being used. First, there are the artistic images, the “icons” of the Hindu religious tradition, which are a primary focus of this essay. The creation of such images is perhaps the earliest form of human symbolization. People lifted out of the ordinary visible data of the world a shape, a form, which crystallized experience and, with its meanings and connotations, told a story. Long before people wrote textual treatises, they “wrote” in images. The term iconography means, literally, “writing in images.” These visual texts, such as the great temples of

Khajurāho or Koṅārak or the array of icons within a modern Hindu temple, constitute a considerable heritage of the human imagination for the scholar of religion. One must learn to “read” these visual texts with the same insight and interpretive skill that is brought to the reading and interpretation of scriptures, commentaries, and theologies.

Here, however, we are concerned with a second meaning of the term *image* — the visual images of India that are presented to us through the medium of film and photography. Rudolf Arnheim has noted what he calls the “widespread unemployment of the senses in every field of academic study.”¹⁷ Photographic images enable us to employ the senses in the process of learning. But they also give us pause to reflect on the role of this new, almost “magical,” form of image-making in our own culture and in our efforts to know and understand another culture.



The ratha in which Kṛṣṇa is pulled through the streets. Udupi, Karnataka

Photography and film have made possible the mass proliferation of images. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag has reflected on the ways in which photography has become a way of defining, appropriating, and recycling “reality.”¹⁸ The image business has

become an important part of modern consumerism and has turned all of us into the creators and consumers of images. People take photographs, buy photographs, go to films, watch television, glance at billboard advertisements. In short, photography has "greatly enlarged the realm of the visible."¹⁹ Both Sontag's articulation and critique of the prominence of the image in modern society serve to underline our need to think seriously about the interpretation and use of film images. We can "see" such scenes as the Hindu pilgrims bathing in the River Gaṅgā in Banāras or the Muslim mourners beating their chests with their fists. But what do we "make" of what we see? Seeing, after all, is an imaginative, constructive activity, an act of making. It is not simply the reception of images on the retina.

The term *hermeneutics* has been used to describe the task of understanding and interpreting ideas and texts. In a similar way, we need to set for ourselves the task of developing a hermeneutic of the visible, addressing the problem of how we understand and interpret what we see, not only in the classical images and art forms created by the various religious traditions, but in the ordinary images of people's traditions, rites, and daily activities which are presented to us through the film-image.

Rudolf Arnheim, in his extensive work on visual perception, has shown that the dichotomy between seeing and thinking which runs through much of the Western tradition, is a very problematic one. In *Visual Thinking*, he contends that visual perception is integrally related to thought.²⁰ It is not the case, according to Arnheim, that the eyes present a kind of raw data to the mind which, in turn, processes it and refines it by thought. Rather, those visual images are the shapers and bearers of thought. Jan Gonda, in writing on the Vedic notion *dhi-*, sometimes translated as "thought," finds similarly that the semantic field of this word in Vedic literature does not correspond as much to our words for "thinking" as it does to our notions of "insight," "vision," and "seeing."²¹ Susanne Langer has also written of the integral relation of thought to the images we see in the "mind's eye." The making of all those images is the fundamental "imaginative" human activity. One might add that it is the fundamental activity of the religious imagination as well. She writes, "Images are, therefore, our readiest instruments for abstracting concepts from the tumbling streams of actual impressions."²²

Seeing is not a passive awareness of visual data, but an active focusing upon it, "touching" it. Arnheim writes, in language that echoes the Hindu notion of seeing and touching: "In looking at an object we reach out for it. With an invisible finger we move through the space around us, go out to the distant places where things are found, touch them, catch them, scan their surfaces, trace their borders, explore their texture. It is an eminently active occupation."²³

According to Arnheim, the way in which we reach out for and grasp the "object we see, either in our immediate range of perception or through the medium of photography, is dependent upon who we are and what we recognize from past experience." The visual imprint of an image, an object, or a scene upon the eye is not at all "objective." (In the image-making process of thinking, we see, sort, and recognize according to the visual phenomenology of our own experience.²⁴ What people notice in the "same" image — be it an image of the dancing Śiva or a film of a Hindu festival procession — depends to some extent on what they can recognize from the visual experience of the past. In the case of film, of course, it also depends on what the photographer has seen and chosen to show us. Arnheim writes that the eye and the mind, working together in the process of cognition, cannot simply note down images that are "already there." "We find instead that direct observation, far from being a mere ragpicker, is an exploration of the form-seeking, form-imposing mind, which needs to understand but cannot until it casts what it sees into manageable models."²⁵

As students confronted with images of India through film and photography, we are challenged to begin to be self-conscious of who we are as "seers." Part of the difficulty of entering the world of another culture, especially one with as intricate and elaborate a visual articulation as India's, is that, for many of us, there are no "manageable models." There are no self-evident ways of recognizing the shapes and forms of art, iconography, ritual life and daily life that we see. Who is Śiva, dancing wildly in a ring of fire? What is happening when the priest pours honey and yogurt over the image of Viṣṇu? Why does the woman touch the feet of the ascetic beggar? For those who enter the visible world of India through the medium of film, the onslaught of strange images raises a multitude of questions. These very questions should be the starting point for

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our learning. Without such self-conscious questioning, we cannot begin to "think" with what we see and we simply dismiss it as strange. Or, worse, we are bound to misinterpret what we see by placing it solely within the context of what we already know from our own world of experience.]

It has sometimes been claimed that the photograph is a kind of universal "language," but our reflections here make us question such a claim. Every photograph and film raises the question of point-of-view and perspective— both that of the maker and that of the viewer. And it raises the question of meaning. This "language," like speech, can obstruct as well as facilitate communication and understanding. Sontag writes that if a photograph is supposed to be a "piece of the world," we need to know what piece of the world it is.²⁶ We need to inquire after its context. She cites Harold Edgerton's famous photograph of what appears to be a coronet, but is really a splash of milk, and Weston's photograph of what appears to be gathered cloth, but is a close-up of a cabbage-leaf. A picture, such as that of a brahmin priest decorating a Śiva *līṅga* for the evening *ārati*, or that of the Goddess Durgā standing upon Mahiṣa may be worth a thousand words, but still we need to know which thousand words.

D. The Image of God

The vivid variety of Hindu deities is visible everywhere in India. Rural India is filled with countless wayside shrines. In every town of some size there are many temples, and every major temple will contain its own panoply of shrines and images. One can see the silver mask of the goddess Durgā, or the stone shaft of the Śiva *līṅga*, or the four-armed form of the god Viṣṇu. Over the doorway of a temple or a home sits the plump, orange, elephant-headed Gaṇeśa or the benign and auspicious Lakṣmī. Moreover, it is not only in temples and homes that one sees the images of the deities. Small icons are mounted at the front of taxis and buses. They decorate the walls of tea stalls, sweet shops, tailors, and movie theatres. They are painted on public buildings and homes by local folk artists. They are carried through the streets in great festival processions.



Śiva Līṅga

It is visibly apparent to anyone who visits India or who sees something of India through the medium of film that this is a culture in which the mythic imagination has been very generative. The images and myths of the Hindu imagination constitute a basic cultural vocabulary and a common idiom of discourse. Since India has "written" prolifically in its images, learning to read its mythology and iconography is a primary task for the student of Hinduism. In learning about Hinduism, it might be argued that perhaps it makes more sense to begin with Gaṇeśa, the elephant-headed god who sits at the thresholds of space and time and who blesses all beginnings, and then proceed through the deities of the Hindu pantheon, rather than to begin with the Indus Valley civilization and proceed through the ages of Hindu history. Certainly for a student who wishes to visit India, the development of a basic iconographic vocabulary is essential, for deities such as the monkey Hanumān or the fierce Kālī confront one at every turn.

When the first European traders and travelers visited India, they were astonished at the multitude of images of the various deities which they saw there. They called them "idols" and described them with combined fascination and repugnance. For example, Ralph Fitch, who traveled as a merchant through north India in the 1500s writes of the images of deities in Banāras: "Their chiefe idols bee blacke and evill favoured, their mouths monstrous, their eares

gilded and full of jewels, their teeth and eyes of gold, silver and glasse, some having one thing in their hands and some another."²⁷

Fitch had no interpretive categories, save those of a very general Western Christian background, with which to make sense of what he saw. Three hundred years did little to aid interpretation. When M. A. Sherring lived in Banāras in the middle of the 1800s he could still write, after studying the city for a long time, of "the worship of uncouth idols, of monsters, of the liṅga and other indecent figures, and of a multitude of grotesque, ill-shapen, and hideous objects."²⁸ When Mark Twain traveled through India in the last decade of the nineteenth century, he brought a certain imaginative humor to the array of "idols" in Banāras, but he remained without what Arnhem would call "manageable models" for placing the visible data of India in a recognizable context. Of the "idols" he wrote, "And what a swarm of them there is! The town is a vast museum of idols — and all of them crude, misshapen, and ugly. They flock through one's dreams at night, a wild mob of nightmares."²⁹

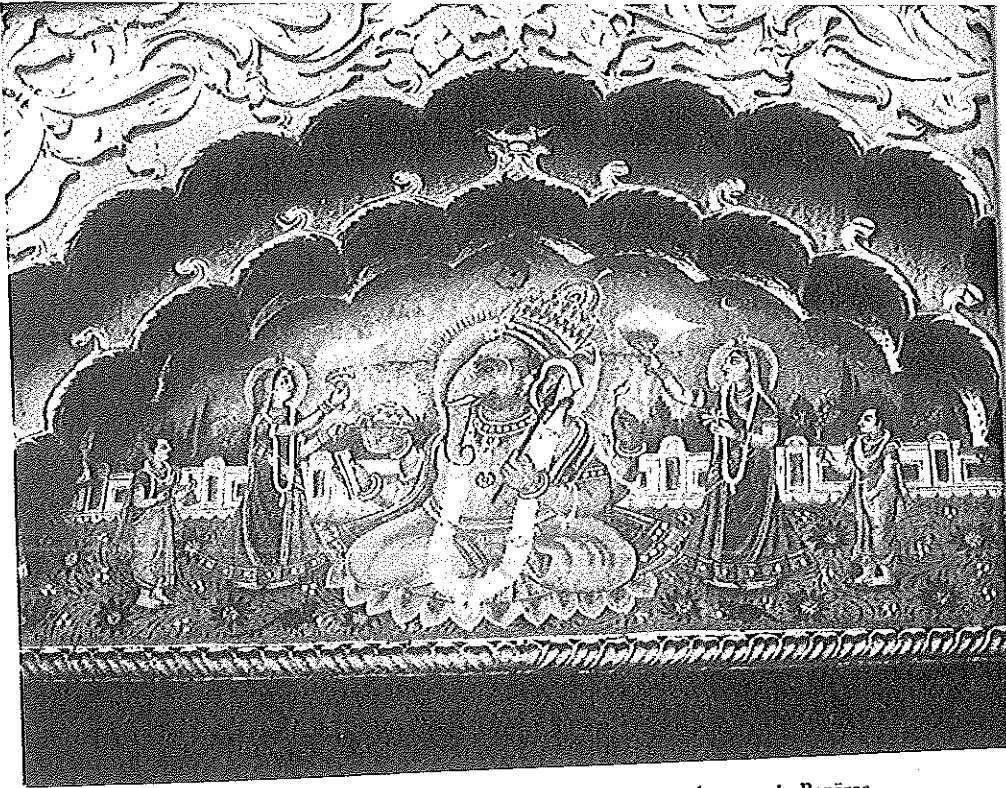
Without some interpretation, some visual hermeneutic, icons and images can be alienating rather than enlightening. Instead of being keys to understanding, they can kindle xenophobia and pose barriers to understanding by appearing as a "wild mob of nightmares," utterly foreign to and unassimilable by our minds. To understand India, we need to raise our eyes from the book to the image, but we also need some means of interpreting and comprehending the images we see.

The bafflement of many who first behold the array of Hindu images springs from the deep-rooted Western antagonism to imaging the divine at all. The Hebraic hostility to "graven images" expressed in the Commandments is echoed repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

The Hebraic resistance to imaging the divine has combined with a certain distrust of the senses in the world of the Greek tradition as well. While the Greeks were famous for their anthropomorphic images of the gods, the prevalent suspicion in the philosophies of classical Greece was that "what the eyes reported was not true."³⁰ Like those of dim vision in Plato's cave, it was thought that people generally accept the mere shadows of reality as "true." Nevertheless,



Durgā as the Slayer of the Buffalo Demon. India, Pallava, 8th century.
Height: 1.5 cm. Denman Waldo Ross Collection, 27.171. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Gaṇeśa, Guardian of the threshold, sitting above a doorway in Banāras

if dim vision described human perception of the ordinary world, the Greeks continued to use the notion of true vision to describe wisdom, that which is seen directly in the full light of day rather than obliquely in the shadowy light of the cave. Arnheim writes, "The Greeks learned to distrust the senses, but they never forgot that direct vision is the first and final source of wisdom. They refined the techniques of reasoning, but they also believed that, in the words of Aristotle, 'the soul never thinks without an image.'³¹

On the whole, it would be fair to say that the Western traditions, especially the religious traditions of the "Book" — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — have trusted the Word more than the Image as a mediator of the divine truth. The Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible are filled with injunctions to "proclaim" and to "hear" the word. The ears were somehow more trustworthy than the eyes. In the Christian tradition this suspicion of the eyes and the image has been a particularly Protestant position.

And yet the visible image has not been without some force in the religious thinking of the West. The verbal icon of God as "Father" or "King" has had considerable power in shaping the Judeo-Christian religious imagination. The Orthodox Christian traditions,

after much debate in the eighth and ninth centuries, granted an important place to the honoring of icons as those "windows" through one might look toward God. They were careful, however, to say that the icon should not be "realistic" and should be only two-dimensional. In the Catholic tradition as well, the art and iconography, especially of Mary and the saints, has had a long and rich history. And all three traditions of the "Book" have developed the art of embellishing the word into a virtual icon in the elaboration of calligraphic and decorative arts. Finally, it should be said that there is a great diversity within each of these traditions. The Mexican villager who comes on his knees to the Virgin of Guadalupe, leaves a bundle of beans, and lights a candle, would no doubt feel more at home in a Hindu temple than in a stark, white New England Protestant church. Similarly, the Moroccan Muslim woman who visits the shrines of Muslim saints, would find India less foreign than did the eleventh century Muslim scholar Alberuni, who wrote that "the Hindus entirely differ from us in every respect."³²

Worshiping as God those "things" which are not God has been despised in the Western traditions as "idolatry," a mere bowing down to "sticks and stones." The difficulty with such a view of idolatry, however, is that anyone who bows down to such things clearly does not understand them to be sticks and stones. No people would identify themselves as "idolators," by faith. Thus, idolatry can be only an outsider's term for the symbols and visual images of some other culture. Theodore Roszak, writing in *Where the Wasteland Ends*, locates the "sin of idolatry" precisely where it belongs: in the eye of the beholder.³³

In beginning to understand the consciousness of the Hindu worshiper who bows to "sticks and stones," an anecdote of the Indian novelist U. R. Anantha Murthy is provocative. He tells of an artist friend who was studying folk art in rural north India. Looking into one hut, he saw a stone daubed with red *kunkum* powder, and he asked the villager if he might bring the stone outside to photograph it. The villager agreed, and after the artist had photographed the stone he realized that he might have polluted this sacred object by moving it outside. Horrified, he apologized to the villager, who replied, "It doesn't matter. I will have to bring another stone and anoint *kunkum* on it." Anantha Murthy comments, "Any piece of stone on which he put *kunkum* became God for the peasant. What

mattered was his faith, not the stone."³⁴ We might add that, of course, the stone matters too. If it did not, the peasant would not bother with a stone at all.

Unlike the zealous Protestant missionaries of a century ago, we are not much given to the use of the term "idolatry" to condemn what "other people" do. Yet those who misunderstood have still left us with the task of understanding, and they have raised an important and subtle issue in the comparative study of religion: What is the nature of the divine image? Is it considered to be intrinsically sacred? Is it a symbol of the sacred? A mediator of the sacred? How are images made, consecrated, and used, and what does this tell us about the way they are understood? But still another question remains to be addressed before we take up these topics. That is the question of the multitude of images. Why are there so many gods?

E. The Polytheistic Imagination

It is not only the image-making capacity of the Hindu imagination that confronts the Western student of Hinduism, but the bold Hindu polytheistic consciousness. Here too, in attempting to understand another culture, we discover one of the great myths of our own: the myth of monotheism. Myths are those "stories" we presuppose about the nature of the world and its structures of meaning. Usually we take our own myths so much for granted that it is striking to recognize them as "myths" which have shaped not only our religious viewpoint, but our ways of knowing. Even Westerners who consider themselves to be secular participate in the myth of monotheism: that in matters of ultimate importance, there is only One — one God, one Book, one Son, one Church, one Seal of the Prophets, one Nation under God. The psychologist James Hillman speaks of a "monotheism of consciousness" which has shaped our very habits of thinking, so that the autonomous, univocal, and independent personality is considered healthy; single-minded decision-making is considered a strength; and the concept of the independent ego as "number one" is considered normal.³⁵

In entering into the Hindu world, one confronts a way of thinking which one might call "radically polytheistic," and if there is any "great divide" between the traditions of India and those of the West,



Streetside Gaṇeśa image, Banāras

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it is in just this fact. Some may object that India has also affirmed Oneness as resolutely and profoundly as any culture on earth, and indeed it has. The point here, however, is that India's affirmation of Oneness is made in a context that affirms with equal vehemence the multitude of ways in which human beings have seen that Oneness and expressed their vision. Indian monotheism or monism cannot, therefore, be aptly compared with the monotheism of the West. The statement that "God is One" does not mean the same thing in India and the West.

At virtually every level of life and thought, India is polycentric and pluralistic. India, with what E. M. Forster called "her hundred mouths,"³⁶ has been the very exemplar of cultural multiplicity. There is geographical and racial diversity from the Pathans of the Punjab to the Dravidians of Tamilnād. There are fourteen major language groups. There is the elaborate social diversity of the caste system. There is the religious diversity of major religious traditions: the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, and Parsis. (As Mark Twain quipped in his diaries from India, "In religion, all other countries are paupers. India is the only millionaire."³⁷ And even within what is loosely called "Hinduism" there are many sectarian strands: Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, Śāktas, Smārtas, and others. Note that the very term *Hinduism* refers only to the "ism" of the land which early Muslims called "Hind," literally, the land beyond the Indus. Hinduism is no more, no less than the "ism" of India.

The diversity of India has been so great that it has sometimes been difficult for Westerners to recognize in India any underlying unity. As the British civil servant John Strachey put it, speaking to an audience at Cambridge University in 1859, "There is no such country, and this is the first and most essential fact about India that can be learned. . . ."³⁸ Seeking recognizable signs of unity — common language, unifying religion, shared historical tradition — he did not see them in India.

6
In part, the unity of India, which Strachey and many others like him could not see, is in its cultural genius for embracing diversity, so that diversity unites, rather than divides. For example, there are the six philosophical traditions recognized as "orthodox." But they are not called "systems" in the sense in which we use that term. Rather, they are *darśanas*. Here the term means not the "seeing" of

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the deity, but the "seeing" of truth. There are many such *darśanas*, many "points of view" or "perspectives" on the truth. And although each has its own starting point, its own theory of causation, its own accepted enumeration of the means by which one can arrive at valid knowledge, these "ways of seeing" share a common goal — liberation — and they share the understanding that all their rivals are also "orthodox." Philosophical discourse, therefore, takes the form of an ongoing dialogue, in which the views of others are explained so that one can counter them with one's own view. Any "point of view" implicitly assumes that another point of view is possible. 8

Moving from the philosophical to the social sphere, there is the well-known diversity of interlocking and interdependent caste groups. On a smaller scale, there is the polycentric system of family authority, which is integral to the extended, joint family. Here not only the father and mother, but grandparents, aunts, and uncles serve as different loci of family authority and fulfill different needs.

9
Not unrelated to this complex polycentrism of the social structure is the polycentric imaging of the pantheon of gods and goddesses. Just as the social and institutional structures of the West have tended historically to mirror the patriarchal monotheism of the religious imagination, so have the social structure and family structure of India displayed the same tendency toward diversification that is visible in the complex polytheistic imagination. At times, the ordering of the diverse parts of the whole seems best described as hierarchical;³⁹ yet it is also true that the parts of the whole are knotted together in interrelations that seem more like a web than a ladder. The unity of India, both socially and religiously, is that of a complex whole. In a complex whole, the presupposition upon which oneness is based is not unity or sameness, but inter-relatedness and diversity.

The German Indologist Betty Heimann uses the image of a crystal to describe this multiplex whole:

Whatever Man sees, has seen or will see, is just one facet only of a crystal. Each of these facets from its due angle provides a correct viewpoint, but none of them alone gives a true all-comprehensive picture. Each serves in its proper place to grasp the Whole, and all of them combined come nearer to its full grasp. However, even the sum of them all does not exhaust all hidden possibilities of approach.⁴⁰

The diversity of deities is part of the earliest Vedic history of the Hindu tradition. In the Rg Veda, the various gods are elaborately praised and in their individual hymns, each is praised as Supreme. Indra may in one hymn be called the "Sole Sovereign of Men and of Gods," and in the next hymn Varuṇa may be praised as the "Supreme Lord, Ruling the Spheres." Max Müller, who was the first great Western interpreter of the Vedas, searched for an adequate term to describe the religious spirit of this literature. It is not monotheism, although there certainly is a vision of divine supremacy as grand as the monotheistic vision. It is not really polytheism, at least if one understands this as the worship of many gods, each with partial authority and a limited sphere of influence. He saw that these Western terms did not quite fit the Hindu situation. To describe the deities of Hinduism, Müller coined the word *kathenotheism* — the worship of one god at a time. Each is exalted in turn. Each is praised as creator, source, and sustainer of the universe when one stands in the presence of that deity. There are many gods, but their multiplicity does not diminish the significance or power of any of them. Each of the great gods may serve as a lens through which the whole of reality is clearly seen.

The spirit which Müller saw in the Vedic hymns continues to be of great significance in many aspects of Indian religious life. To celebrate one deity, one sacred place, one temple, does not mean there is no room for the celebration of another. Each has its hour. One learns, for example, that there are three gods in the tradition today: Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the Devī. But it is clear from their hymns and rites that these deities are not regarded as having partial powers. Each is seen, by those who are devotees, as Supreme in every sense. Each is alone seen to be the creator, sustainer, and final resting place of all. Each has assembled the minor deities and autochthonous divinities of India into its own entourage. The frustration of students encountering the Hindu array of deities for the first time is, in part, the frustration of trying to get it all straight and to place the various deities and their spouses, children, and manifestations in a fixed pattern in relation to one another. But the pattern of these imaged deities is like the pattern of the kaleidoscope: one twist of the wrist and the relational pattern of the pieces changes.

In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, a seeker named Vidagdha Śākalya approaches the sage Yājñavalkya with the question, "How many gods are there, Yājñavalkya?"⁴¹

"Three thousand three hundred and six," he replied.

"Yes," said he, "but just how many gods are there, Yājñavalkya?"

"Thirty-three."

"Yes," said he, "but just how many gods are there, Yājñavalkya?"

"Six."

"Yes," said he, "but just how many gods are there, Yājñavalkya?"

"Three."

"Yes," said he, "but just how many gods are there, Yājñavalkya?"

"Two."

"Yes," said he, "but just how many gods are there, Yājñavalkya?"

"One and a half."

"Yes," said he, "but just how many gods are there, Yājñavalkya?"

"One."

Yājñavalkya continues by explaining the esoteric knowledge of the different enumerations of the gods. But the point he makes is hardly esoteric. It is not the secret knowledge of the forest sages, but is part of the shared presuppositions of the culture. In any Hindu temple there will be, in addition to the central sanctum, a dozen surrounding shrines to other deities: Gaṇeśa, Hanumān, Durgā, Gaurī, and so on. Were one to ask any worshiper Vidagdha Śākalya's question, "How many gods are there?" one would hear Yājñavalkya's response from even the most uneducated. "Sister, there are many gods. There is Śiva here, and there is Viṣṇu, Gaṇeśa, Hanumān, Gaṅgā, Durgā, and the others. But of course, there is really only one. These many are differences of name and form."

"Name and form" — *nāma rūpa* — is a common phrase, used often to describe the visible, changing world of *samsāra* and the multiple world of the gods. There is one reality, but the names and forms by which it is known are different. It is like clay, which is one, but which takes on various names and forms as one sees it in bricks, earthen vessels, pots, and dishes. While some philosophers

would contend that the perception of the one is a higher and clearer vision of the truth than the perception of the many, Hindu thought is most distinctive for its refusal to make the one and the many into opposites. For most, the manyness of the divine is not superseded by oneness. Rather, the two are held simultaneously and are inextricably related. As one of the great praises of the Devī puts it: "Nameless and Formless Thou art, O Thou Unknowable. All forms of the universe are Thine: thus Thou art known."⁴²

19 } The very images of the gods portray in visual form the multiplicity and the oneness of the divine, and they display the tensions and the seeming contradictions that are resolved in a single mythic image. Many of the deities are made with multiple arms, each hand bearing an emblem or a weapon, or posed in a gesture, called a *mudrā*. The emblems and *mudrās* indicate the various powers that belong to the deity. Gaṇeśa's lotus is an auspicious sign, while his hatchet assures that in his role as guardian of the threshold he is armed to prevent the passage of miscreants. The Devī Durgā has eight arms and in her many hands she holds the weapons and emblems of all the gods, who turned their weapons over to her to kill the demon of chaos. Multiple faces and eyes are common. The creator Brahmā, for example, has four faces, looking in each of the four directions. Śiva and Viṣṇu are depicted together in one body, each half with the emblems appropriate to its respective deity. Similarly, Śiva is sometimes depicted in the *Ardhanārīśvara*, "Half-Woman God" form, which is half Śiva and half Sakti. The androgynous image is split down the middle: one-breasted, clothed half in male garments and half in female. In a similar way, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are sometimes shown as entwined together in such a fashion that, while one could delineate two separate figures, they appear to the eye as inseparably one.

The variety of names and forms in which the divine has been perceived and worshiped in the Hindu tradition is virtually limitless. If one takes some of the persistent themes of Hindu creation myths as a starting point, the world is not only the embodiment of the divine, but the very body of the divine. The primal person, Puruṣa, was divided up in the original sacrifice to become the various parts of the cosmos (Ṛg Veda X.90). Or, in another instance, the original germ or egg from which the whole of creation evolved was a unitary whole, containing in a condensed form



Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, Folk art from Orissa



Vishnu, 15th Century bronze Tanjore Art Gallery, No. 8

within it the whole of the potential and life of the universe (Rg Veda X.121; Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.19; Aitareya Upaniṣad 1.1). If all names and forms evolved from the original seed of the universe, then all have the potential for revealing the nature of the whole. While far-sighted visionaries may describe the one Brahman by the negative statement, "Not this . . . Not this . . .," still from the standpoint of this world, one can as well describe Brahman with the infinite affirmation, "It is this . . . It is this. . . ." The two approaches are inseparable. As Betty Heimann put it, "... whenever the uninitiated outsider is surprised, embarrassed, or repulsed by the exuberant paraphernalia of materialistic display in Hindu cult, he must keep in mind that, side by side with these, stands the utmost abstraction in religious feeling and thought, the search for the *Neti-Neti* Brahman, the 'not this, not that,' which denies itself to all representations, higher or lower."⁴³