

ON MEANING AND MANTRAS  
ESSAYS IN HONOR OF FRITS STAAL



Frits Staal at the 2011 *agnicayana* in Kerala, India.  
Photos courtesy of Michael Witzel.

**On Meaning and Mantras**  
**Essays in Honor of Frits Staal**

**Edited by**

**George Thompson**  
**and**  
**Richard K. Payne**

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# Contemporary Issues in Buddhist Studies

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# Eroticism in Hindu Texts and Modern Hindus

**P. Pratap Kumar**  
Emeritus Professor,  
University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

## Introduction

In a recent online discussion of religion in South Asia list one scholar asked to find a verse that he came across in his research on the Mahābhārata. Here is how he made the request:

I am hoping someone can tell me the origin of this (rather vulgar, sorry) verse cited by Nilakantha in his commentary on MBh 3:116:8: *sundaramṇi puruṣaṇi dṛṣṭvā bhrātaram pītaram sutam / yonir dravati nārīṇām satyaṇi satyaṇi janārdana //*.

I was particularly interested in the apologetic manner in which he qualified his request. It represented a typically English sense of “public decency”—in public one does not use language that sounds offensive to the listeners. When Lord Macaulay introduced English education in India, his desire was to introduce Indians to English customs and habits so that they would become “civilized.” Whether or not English education “civilized” Indians, there is certainly evidence to suggest that Indian moral sensibilities have certainly been affected by the long presence of the English in India. Whether or not English education is the direct cause of the Indian reluctance to speak of matters of a sexual nature in public, contemporary Indian society certainly reflects an ambivalent and mixed bag of social conventions in this regard. On the one hand, Indian audiences can enjoy an erotic dance display on stage in traditional dance forms, and nowadays on the celluloid screens of Bollywood. On the other hand, no one in contemporary Indian society behaves in an openly sexual manner or speaks about sexual matters in open discussion, especially within traditional circles.

While this is generally the case, a host of Hindu texts are replete with erotic discussions and these texts are often considered religious and hence sacred. A lay Hindu is generally oblivious to these references in



Hindu texts, primarily due to ignorance about the texts, and pandits generally avoid commenting extensively on them. For instance, both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja make no comment on the reference of an explicit discussion about sexual intercourse between a man and woman in the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (6.4.1 ff). This seeming avoidance and reluctance to comment on such matters might reflect the orthodox traditional mindset and might have resulted in concealing them from lay readers or listeners, particularly in the context of religious devotion. Such avoidance of erotic texts found in sacred books is not peculiar to Hinduism. Relative reluctance to read or talk about the Song of Solomon in the Bible also speaks directly to the commonly held view that pious religious folk tend to avoid such erotic texts.

But once the very same religious texts became available to a larger academic public that may or may not be Hindu, let alone orthodox, it became inevitable for these matters to be brought out into public discourse. This inevitably resulted in a surprised and shocked response from the practicing Hindu lay public, particularly from the educated middle class, on realizing that their religious texts contained such erotic discussions. So, the question is: how should Hindu intellectuals as well as the lay public make sense of these so-called concealed matters of eroticism? The general lay response has been denial of the presence of such matters in their religious texts, as evidenced in the saga of the student protest around an essay by Professor A. K. Ramanujan that was made a core essay for the B.A. Honours degree program in the History Department of Delhi University.<sup>1</sup> The denial is further amplified by anger and frustration and casting blame on “foreign” and “Western” attempts to “distort” Hindu culture. In an academic discussion, avoidance of or reluctance to discuss matters that may cause some participants discomfort is not really an option, as this would mean that scholarly criticality and rigor are compromised and academic freedom curtailed. Therefore, let me first outline some evidence of eroticism within Hindu sacred texts. I shall be selective, as the idea is to mainly offer some examples of what there is rather than being exhaustive on the matter concerned.

### **Eroticism in Hindu Texts**

In Hindu texts, most of the allusions to sexual metaphors and encounters seem to occur in the context of the creation of the universe or the creative powers of the gods or progeny for humans. It is not uncommon for Hindu texts to depict gods in a most ambivalent manner. In the ancient

texts, such depictions carried metaphors of sexual intercourse. In the *Ṛgveda*, *inter alia*, there is a reference to the sky god (Dyaus) having sexual intercourse with his daughter, the dawn goddess (Uṣas) (RV X.lxi.4–7).<sup>2</sup> This topic is elaborated in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (3:33): Prajāpati becomes a deer and chases his daughter, who has changed to an antelope; he has sexual intercourse with her, which of course angered the gods, who then placed a curse on him; later he was punished by Rudra, who was born out of him (Prajāpati). As A. Berriedale Keith points out, this Prajāpati in later Upaniṣadic texts becomes transformed into Brahman in the neuter gender:

Prajāpati might, it is clear, have become a much greater figure had it not been for the fact that the philosophic spirit which conceived him soon went beyond the original idea and transformed the male, as too personal for the expression of the absolute, into the neuter Brahman Svayaṃbhu (“Self-Existent Prayer”).<sup>3</sup>

Whether this transformation of Prajāpati into Brahman has anything to do with overcoming the sexual connotations associated with him is not clear.<sup>4</sup> As Jan Gonda points out, however, Prajāpati does become the “originator” of expiation (*prāyaścitta*) rituals in the *Grihya Sūtra* literature.<sup>5</sup> It is also not surprising that Prajāpati becomes integral to the wedding rituals performed according to the *Grihya Sūtras*. Here he is propitiated to ensure that the couple will have offspring.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, in the Upaniṣadic texts there are explicit details of sexual matters, again in relation to offspring. The *Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BU) contains details of a ritualized procedure for how a woman must submit to her male partner for sexual intercourse even without her consent in order to obtain progeny (BU 6.4.1 ff). The text begins with the *Ṛgveda* allusion and speaks first about Prajāpati creating a woman and having intercourse with her, as he needed a base for his semen. Here the symbolism is elaborated—the vulva of the woman becomes “the sacrificial ground; her pubic hair is the sacred grass; her labia majora are the *soma* press; her labia minora are the fire blazing at the center” (BU 6.4.3). From this, a ritual doctrine is developed:

A man who engages in sexual intercourse *with this knowledge* obtains as great a world as a man who performs a *soma* sacrifice, and he appropriates to himself the merits of the women<sup>7</sup> with whom he has sex. The women, on the other hand, appropriate to themselves the merits of a man who engages in sexual intercourse with them *without this knowledge*. (BU 6.4.3; emphasis added)

What follows from here includes detailed instructions for a man who wants to have sex with a woman whether or not she wishes to. The procedures explained in a ritualized manner are clear for when the man wants to have sex with a woman who accepts willingly, or when she refuses when he wants to impregnate her (BU 6.4.6–12).<sup>8</sup> In modern times this would be defined as rape, but not so in the language of the ancient texts. It is important to note that all of the erotic references in these early texts are significantly in the context of the rituals associated with progeny, and no other sense seems possible.

In the epic literature, both the epics contain copious details of sexual encounters between humans and gods, and among humans. The genealogy of the Kuru dynasty in the *Mahābhārata* begins with the amorous dalliance of Viśvāmitra<sup>9</sup> and Menaka (the celestial being), who was sent by Indra to distract the sage from his ascetic practice.<sup>10</sup> In contemporary society, a woman seeking to have a child by the husband of another woman might be construed as an adulterer. But Sarmaṣṭha, the maid of Devayāni, seeks to have a child by Devayāni's husband, Yayāti. The willing Yayāti expresses fear that he might have to lie about the liaison to his wife. Sarmaṣṭha gives a brief lesson in ethics: it is acceptable to lie in the following five cases: in joking, in regard to women, marriage, threat to life, and when faced with losing all of one's possessions (Mbh 1.77.16–17). Above all, she pleads with him to help her preserve her virtue by giving her a child (Mbh 1.77.20–21). But here is the shocker to the modern mind—eventually Sarmaṣṭha has three children by Yayāti, and once the secret comes out and she is confronted by Devayāni, Sarmaṣṭha responds, “A friend's husband is, according to usage, one's own husband as well” (Mbh 1.77.20). After several long genealogical narratives, the *Mahābhārata* story comes to the main narrative, which opens with a sex scene: King Mahābhiṣa in the company of the gods is carried away by the nakedness of the river goddess (Gaṅgā), which was caused by the wind god (Vāyu). Consequently, both the king and the river goddess are cursed to become humans (Mbh 1.91).

The intrinsic relationship between sexual dalliance and being cursed plays out in the *Mahābhārata* in many places, and emanating from these are the ethics of expediency, as illustrated in the example cited above from MBH 1.77.16. Again, consistent with the older textual tradition, the allusions to erotic exploits are primarily in the context of progeny. An interesting instance in this regard is the story of Pāṇḍu<sup>11</sup> having children by other men (celestial beings) who have intercourse with his wife. His first wife, Kunti, initially refuses to concede to Pāṇḍu's request, insisting that

she would only be loyal to him. But Pāṇḍu explains that in the old custom women could have any number of men and the practice of women settling with one man is attributed to Śvetaketu, son of Uddālaka. When another sage, Vaśiṣṭa,<sup>12</sup> comes to take away Uddālaka's wife, his son Śvetaketu tries to stop his mother from being taken away by a stranger, but Uddālaka restrains him. Śvetaketu, unhappy about the situation, declares that from then on all women should have only one man for a husband and likewise, men should also be loyal to their wives (note the plural!). This is known ever since as the law of Śvetaketu (Mbh 1.113.17–20).

There is generally a tendency in the *Rāmāyaṇa* to depict most of its characters as virtuous and ethical. As mentioned in note 8, Vaśiṣṭa of the *Mahābhārata* is a wife-stealer, yet in the *Rāmāyaṇa* he is the most virtuous sage. Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* is portrayed most erotically, yet he is often seen to flout ethics in the interest of securing the victory of the Pāṇḍava brothers, while Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa* is a righteous and well-behaved prince. There is an extraordinary emphasis of asceticism in the *Rāmāyaṇa* text; for instance, note the story of Sāgara and his descendants, who one after the other practice asceticism and go to the world of Indra. This eventually culminates in a tradition of royal asceticism in which Bhagīratha is depicted as royal ascetic who brings Gaṅgā down to the earth (Rām 1.38–44; 1.44.17).

Even after clearly emphasizing the ascetic tradition strongly, the *Rāmāyaṇa* also dwells at some length on the sexual encounters between Viśvāmitra and Menaka, who was sent by the gods to distract him. Later it also refers to Indra's failed attempt in sending the celestial Raṃbha to undo the ascetic power of Viśvāmitra (Rām 1.63.20, 1.64.1). In another instance, Indra, king of the gods, takes on the form of the sage Gautama and copulates with Gautama's wife, Ahalya. It is interesting to note that although Ahalya realizes that it is Indra, the king of the gods in disguise, she falls for his attraction and willingly agrees to his sexual advances. What is also important to note is that the poet does not hesitate to use highly sensual language appropriate for the scene, e.g., Indra addresses the hermit's wife as a "well-formed one" (*susamāhite*) and says, "O, the one with well-formed hips, I am very satisfied" (*suśroni parituṣṭo'smi*) (Rām 1.48.18–22)

Furthermore, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not averse to the practice of offering meat and liquor—aspects that are often integral to erotic discussions—as is befitting an important guest. During Bharata's journey in search of Rāma, in order to persuade him to return to Ayodhya from his exile, Guha, a local tribal king, offers fish, meat, and honey in his honor (Rām

2.84.10); later, when Bharata reaches the hermitage of Bharadvāja, the hermit offers him the choicest of liquors: “Let *maireyam* (liquor extracted from a palm tree) and other refined liquor flow (*sunīṣṭitām surām*)” (Rām 2.91.15). Nothing that is generally associated with so-called extraneous behavior seems to be excluded from Hindu texts.

Not only written texts but also a host of other visually represented “texts” also mediate erotic images of Hindu gods and goddesses. The reliefs on the exteriors of the Khajurāho temples illustrate the most elaborate *Kāmasūtra* texts created by the Candela dynasties. The imposing fortresses built by their fellow Rajputs, the Bundelas, are situated not far from the Khajurāho temples: the two complexes sit next to each other, one symbolizing the power of eroticism and sensuality, the other the power of the warriors. In both places it is Śiva who is depicted—Śiva as the erotic god and Śiva as the great ascetic warrior. One is an inversion of the other, yet they are shown together without contradiction.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the Bundelas, from their impenetrable fortresses, protected the erotic temples at the Khajurāho site from invading Afghan warriors. The clue to the presence of such inversions may be in what Stella Kramrisch points to:

[T]heir images are stationed on the temple walls for the purpose of attracting the eye, the senses, and the mind of the devotee, so that he concentrates on them and becomes oblivious of all distraction. By contemplating their enthralling presence he is led into the temple.<sup>14</sup>

Kramrisch generally subscribes to the idea that there is an inner and meta-meaning to the outer text or sculpture: “The configurations of Indian sculpture are based on what the eye sees, but proceed beyond empirical truth to express the metaphysical.”<sup>15</sup> But, in the few lines quoted above, she hones in on an interesting idea from the viewpoint of the notion of inversion: “oblivious of all distraction,” “he is led into the temple.” In other words, what seems to be distracting by itself is now the focal point for further investigation. No longer averse to spirituality as such, it is what I would refer to as “inverted forms of esoteric spirituality,” to borrow Ralph Slotten’s phrase.<sup>16</sup>

### **Making Sense of Eroticism in Hindu Texts**

The modern Hindu disquiet regarding the existence of eroticism in Hindu texts has been illustrated in a number of recent incidents related to banning academic works by Western scholars, e.g., Paul Courtright’s 1989 book on Gaṇeśa and Jeffrey Kripal’s 1998 book on Kālī. There have

been other incidents as well, such as James Laine's 2003 book on Śivaji. More recently, Wendi Doniger's *Hindus: An Alternative History* (2009) is another example of a book that became the object of Hindu disquiet regarding eroticism and the kind of explanations proffered by some Western scholars.<sup>17</sup>

In general, there is a sense that regional versions of some of the Hindu texts, such as the epics and mythological texts, have been rendered in such a way that allusions to incidents or events, particularly erotic references that were received awkwardly in later times, were either deleted or modified. In this regard, not only allusions to eroticism in texts but also other references to seemingly unethical behavior have been suppressed, especially in the regional traditions. G. P. Deshpande reminds us of one such example in the wake of the rightwing Hindu nationalists' attack on the Muslim mosque in Ayodhya in 1992:

I am certain that these pop-Hindus do not know, for example, that when Tulsidas wrote the *Rāmāyaṇa*, he removed the story of Shambuka altogether. Shambuka was a Shudra who had undertaken to do *tapasya*! The shastras did not permit it. Hence Ram killed him. Tulsidas found this quite uncomfortable. He could not justify Ram there and therefore he removed the story. The story appears in the original *Rāmāyaṇa* by Valmiki. Tulsidas was apologetic about it and expunged it from his text.<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, in the Sanskrit tradition as well as in various regional traditions, the authors of Hindu texts used sexual metaphors consciously to construct a worldview in which the mundane and the spiritual coexisted comfortably side by side, especially in the context of rituals related to progeny. They do not seem to have seen any incongruity in using such language and metaphors, which to a modern reader may seem inappropriate. There is a plethora of institutions and organizations that offer teachings of Hinduism today that quite consciously obfuscate such references in the Hindu religious texts, as noted above. None of the texts I referred to above are *Kāmasūtra*-type texts that could easily be associated with such erotic language and metaphor; they are the mainstream religious texts that are often read and discoursed on in religious contexts with utmost devotion.

There is sufficient evidence within the Hindu tradition for the transformation of outward ritual practices that involved sexual activity and the consumption of meat and wine. In the early history of Hinduism, the advent of both Buddhism and Jainism may have influenced such changes. In later periods, Brāhmanism became increasingly ritualistically orthodox

by eliminating, suppressing, or sublimating what seemed unacceptable or was intended for private discourse only, e.g., the Smārta Brāhmins transforming the left-handed *Kaula Tantra* into a sublimated Śrī Vidya practice, which might have been effected by or around the time of the Advaita philosopher Śaṅkara. Even so, almost all esoteric traditions required strict ritual initiation and a dedicated practice under the supervision of a teacher. Western scholarship has long pointed out the role of the works of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Noam Chomsky in bringing to the fore the “phenomenon of concealment” that brings with it a profound sense of secrecy or privacy.<sup>19</sup> Within the Indian tradition, the extent to which esoteric sexual practices among Baul poets have been sublimated by the later Bengali literary tradition, dominated by intellectuals such as Rabindranath Tagore, has been pointed out by Charles H. Capwell.<sup>20</sup>

Such sublimation of incongruent (or uncomfortable for certain sensibilities) aspects in Hindu texts is not necessarily a modern phenomenon. We can identify at least two ways in which erotic aspects have been reinterpreted in ways that would not seem incongruent to the lay or orthodox Hindu: devotionalism and tantrism. Ascribing spiritual meanings to erotic references within Hindu texts has been one of the most fruitful ways Hindus can find them to be coherent within their traditions. As such, we can find a whole genre of *bhakti* literature within Śaivism and particularly in Vaiṣṇavism that interprets erotic aspects in terms of spiritual meanings. The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (aka *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*) is a good illustration of how Kṛṣṇa’s erotic relationships with a host of his female companions, especially with Rādhā, are seen as an intensely devotional relationship between God and his devotee. Devotionalism, with its spiritual emphasis, has fundamentally influenced the modern Hindu view of such erotic references to the extent that today, even when such erotic images are discussed, the modern Hindu seems not to be embarrassed in the midst of other cultures. It is therefore easy to understand why devotees visiting temples and witnessing erotic images on the temple walls or listening to devotional songs in vernaculars that contain erotic descriptions of gods and goddesses are unashamed by them and seem least embarrassed.

One of the most famous songs in praise of Lord Veṅkateśvara that is performed regularly at the Śrī Veṅkateśvara temple in Tirupati is clearly a good example of how a strongly devotional attitude on the part of devotees overtakes any erotic meanings of the songs they hear. One of the verses reads: “Don’t look at Śrīdevī naughtily; don’t make Alamēlumaṅga



jealous; make both dear wives sit on either side, arousing, caressing, and delighting.”<sup>21</sup> Eroticism such as this built into devotional poetry is common and does not seem to cause any discomfort among devotees. With all its eroticism in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Kṛṣṇa devotees read the text with no uneasiness. In Hinduism, if eroticism is made integral to devotionality/spirituality, asceticism is seen as its counterbalance. If Kṛṣṇa devotionality is seen as the paragon of *viraha bhakti*,<sup>22</sup> both Śiva and his cognate deity Skandha/Subrahmaṇya (Murukan in Tamil tradition) offer ascetic options to Hindu devotees. Within the Viṣṇu incarnation complex, both Kṛṣṇa and Rāma as two different images—one as the erotic and the other more inclined toward the ascetic—sit side by side with no contradiction. Rāma is depicted as an illustration of the ascetic tendency in Hindu practice, although in the North Indian context Rāma devotionality is as intense as Kṛṣṇa devotionality is in the south and around the western and eastern coastal regions of India. As such, devotionality, both in the form of the erotic as well as the ascetic mode, have been a useful way to make sense of and accommodate seemingly incongruent aspects of Hinduism.

Modern Hindus thus have come to receive the gradually evolved sublimated traditions, and it is perhaps not fair to suggest that there has been any conscious attempt on the part of Hindus to obfuscate or suppress erotic texts within Hinduism. What scholars who engage in reading texts using linguistic and other modern scientific methods perhaps should take into account is that the average Hindu is not exposed to or is not privileged to read the innumerable texts that may have shaped his or her worldview. They are instead exposed to various devotional discourses within which some of the texts are embedded.

Here lies perhaps one of the most crucial differences between how a born Hindu encounters his or her religious tradition and how an outside scholar, whether of Indian or Western background, is exposed to Hinduism. Born Hindus are generally introduced to their religion (as is common in the case of virtually all religious communities) through family traditions and localized cultural expressions. In contrast, the outside scholar invariably begins by learning the languages of the Hindu traditions and, in most cases, he or she begins with Sanskrit, which is considered the primary medium to enter Hindu texts. They then begin to read some basic texts such as the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. A significant number of Western scholars who teach Hinduism mostly at the undergraduate level remain at this basic level of entrance into the Hindu worldview, while a few specialists undertake more detailed reading of



advanced texts. Again, even there the specialists tend to read the texts only of their specific areas, e.g., those who specialize in Vedic texts rarely read other, later compositions, tantra specialists read mostly tantric texts, and so on. Naturally, a scholar's view of Hinduism is shaped by what they read, and scholar-specialists may also tend to think that born Hindus do not know as much as they do, which in a way is true—at least in terms of in-depth scholarly study. But from the point of view of a practicing Hindu who is born into his or her tradition, he or she does not indeed need to know the various texts, as they sufficiently rely on what has been passed on to them by their families and the communities among whom they practice their tradition. Thus, there exists a tension between how a born Hindu comes to his or her tradition and how scholars come to understand Hinduism. Neither can be faulted for their entrée into and subsequent understanding of Hinduism. It is interesting to note that both groups rely on their respective sets of conventions and traditions—scholars on scholarly conventions and native practitioners on the oral and informal knowledge of their traditions. This tension between the two—the academic community and the native Hindu communities—is important to recognize in order to examine the issue of whether or not a conscious or unconscious obfuscation of some aspects of Hinduism took place.

The second form of making sense of erotic and other seemingly incongruent aspects of Hinduism are the tantric-oriented forms that internalize the meanings of ritual and privatize their performance. Because such “esoteric” rituals are accessed mainly only by initiated devotees and the general public is not permitted to read about or witness them, general knowledge of tantrism is certainly limited to publicly available sources. Although today many tantric texts have been translated and are available in the public domain, the general public is less aware of them, largely because their orientation to Hindu practice revolves around temples and other neo-Hindu organizations that distribute certain types of theistic Hinduism to which the general public can relate.

The issue of obfuscation of texts that detail aspects considered uncomfortable by contemporary Hindus is often attributed to Hindu nationalist organizations, which responded to what they perceived as the incursion of Western or nonnative Indian value systems, specifically Christianity and Islam. Some scholars have pointed out that Hindu nationalism is in fact an historical byproduct of colonialism, specifically eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European Romantic and Enlightenment ideas.<sup>23</sup> Modern Hinduism is also attributed to influences from

Western Orientalists and Christian missionaries. However, some scholars have argued against the attribution of influence solely from Western Orientalists and Christian missionaries by discussing the roles played by Indian intellectuals themselves.<sup>24</sup>

Although Indian texts such as the *Upaniṣads*, the epics, and the mythological texts have certain pedagogical significance in offering spiritual and ethical guidance to Hindus, it would be erroneous to see their role primarily from that point of view. The Indian texts are also performative, especially in the context of ritual, and therefore derive their significance as texts of ritual procedures. But they can also be read as texts that offer poetic imagination and entertainment within a religious context. In recent years, particularly since the time of such scholars as Radhakrishnan<sup>25</sup> there has been a proliferation of attempts to defend the ethical component of Hindu texts, against the outside critique that ethics is not central to the Hindu tradition.<sup>26</sup> There is nothing problematic about looking for ethical imperatives in Hindu texts, but inadvertently such attempts have rationalized Hindu texts to the extent that it has culminated in the popular mind that the sole purpose of these texts is to offer moral lessons.

This trend of rationalizing Hindu texts through moral ideas perhaps could be attributed to the emergence of neo-Vedānta-based Hindu discourse. Against the charge levied by some inside scholars (e.g., Agehananda Bharati and others) that neo-Hinduism produced “inauthentic” Hinduism, Brian Hatcher offers a history of neo-Vedānta that profusely uses ideas from East and West eclectically.<sup>27</sup> Hatcher’s work makes abundantly clear the extent to which neo-Vedānta has played a role in constructing a discourse on Hinduism through appropriating skillfully, in order to make something that has been denounced from Christian and Islamic influences a more palatable Hindu view, and hence suitable for public consumption. In the process of this rationalization based on an eclectic approach, what is evident, as Hatcher puts it, are “apparent betrayals of meaning and errors of memory occasioned by the eclectic’s selective habits of borrowing.”<sup>28</sup> Inadvertently, however, this new discourse on Hinduism has become the handmaid of Hindutva ideology.

There seems to be something natural about how Hinduism places two completely extreme elements next to each other. The poets of the Hindu texts from the Vedas to the epics and even to the present time effortlessly move from highly erotic narratives to very devout and morally uplifting statements. In other words, for them the erotic narratives are not necessarily repugnant (or titillating) as they might be for a modern person

with Victorian moral proclivities. If this were not the case, for instance, the entire *Mahābhārata* epic narrative would not have been possible. By emphasizing the moral and ethical lessons of the *Gītā* in particular, or the *Mahābhārata* in general, we might lose the many diverse motifs in the epic narratives and the many social and cultural roles the narratives may have played. The proliferation of the ethical treatment of the many Hindu texts and the tendency to draw broad ethical comparisons with works of the Western intellectual traditions<sup>29</sup> inadvertently ignores the natural tendencies of Indian intellectuals and poets to weave together seemingly extraneous elements into a coherent whole.

In the language of ritual, Brahmanical authors do not seem to think in moral terms. For instance, as mentioned earlier in *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 3:33, when Prajāpati engages in what has been termed incest, the text actually uses the term *akṛitam*, meaning that which is not to be done, i.e., taboo. The language is very ritualized and not moralistic.<sup>30</sup> The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* is preoccupied more with the ritual procedures emanating from the Prajāpati episode, which is only alluded to in the *Ṛgveda* but is substantially elaborated in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* for ritual purposes.

### Conclusion

Simply because people in modern times are embarrassed by the presence of erotic passages within devotional texts does not and need not mean that the original authors were similarly embarrassed or viewed such content as untoward in any way. We modern Hindus seem to find such erotic references shameful and embarrassing. Yet the artistic profundity present in these texts need not be sacrificed at the altar of a supposed “sacred ethics” that may well be influenced by nonindigenous values. To put it another way, think of the artists who sculpted the beautiful images on the pillars of the Khajurāho temples. These skilled artists went to great lengths to carve the images of the many nude figures of men and women with great attention to detail. Surely if they were embarrassed by or ashamed of such subject matter, they could not have produced such excellent, expressive work. Embarrassment or a feeling of shame is only in our viewing of it today. It is unnecessary to postulate moral implications when there might be none. In any case, at the level of ritual, devotees are generally oblivious to the erotic symbols and expressions and conduct the rituals almost mechanically. This does not mean they are unaware of the mythic narratives, especially those that circulate in the *sthālapurāṇas*. In other words, both ritual and legend or

myth are equally potent and significant statements, and one does not necessarily need both for meaning to be obtained, although it is helpful if there is a correlation between the two.

While from a practitioner's point of view it is understandable to engage in emotional, theological, and devotional treatment of texts, such treatment need not see academic and intellectual analyses of texts as in any way prejudicial to their religious and devotional engagement. Excessive theologizing and ethicizing of the texts from a narrow perspective can impede intellectual honesty and integrity in dealing with a variety of possible motifs within them. There must be room in society for doubting theology and its metaphysics, an essentially hermeneutical tool known as "suspicion," or what Pierre Bourdieu calls "radical doubt."<sup>31</sup> After all, religion is not only about otherworldly matters, it is also, as Bourdieu suggests, a social field—regardless of believers' claims that religious ideas are derived from a higher source. The domination, intimidation, and violence often associated with religion, as seen in the case of the Delhi University incident, is demonstrable and socially traceable. I therefore share in Bourdieu's view that religion, in this case Hinduism, can be and is assailable, and need not be protected under the guise of religious sentiment that can in fact foster religious intolerance.

Let me conclude by echoing the sentiment Bourdieu phrases so well, quoted by Terry Rey: "Nothing in the social world is unassailable in this regard—not art, not education, not sociology, and certainly not religion."<sup>32</sup> And I add the following from the *Mahābhārata*, in the words of Sakuntala, addressing her husband who had forgotten that she was his wife:

A hundred horse sacrifices had once been weighed against Truth, and Truth was found heavier than a hundred horse sacrifices. O king, Truth, I ween, may be equal to the study of the entire Vedas and ablutions in all holy places. There is no virtue equal to Truth: there is nothing superior to Truth. O king, Truth is God himself; Truth is the highest vow.<sup>33</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2004 the Department of History at Delhi University included as a compulsory reading in its undergraduate degree program an essay by Prof. A. K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation." According to some commentators, the arrangement was for a period of four years, i.e., up to the 2008 academic year. In 2008, Delhi University's Council decided to continue it. But in October 2011 the Council decided to remove Ramanujan's essay from the reading list, allegedly due to pressure from rightwing Hindu protestors on campus. However, according to some members of the university, the decision to act

was precipitated by a court action brought by rightwing supporters and a court order to the Council to internally settle the matter and report back to the court in a matter of days. Some commentators countered the criticism leveled against the Council that it had introduced the item relating to the essay at the last minute, allegedly to push the issue in favor of dropping the essay from the curriculum, asserting that the Vice Chancellor's last-minute introduction of the item was not intentional but that he was forced to do so under pressure from the court to act quickly. Whatever the case, the ensuing debate on the saga went global through both mainstream media and social media.

- <sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that RV 10:61 verses 4–9 were deleted from the electronic text of Ralph T. H. Griffith's translation, *The Hymns of the Rigveda* (Benares: E. J. Lazarus & Co., 1896, second ed.), 2 vols.; <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/index.htm>, even though in the original Griffith translated the verses into Latin, not English!
- <sup>3</sup> For Prajāpati's identification with Brahmā, see *Aitareya Upaniṣad* 3:3. See A. Berriedale Keith, *Indian Mythology, The Mythology of All Races*, vol. 6 (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1917), chap. 3. [www.rbedrosian.com/keithint.htm](http://www.rbedrosian.com/keithint.htm), accessed March, 30, 2015.
- <sup>4</sup> In the *Mahābhārata* version of the creation story, Prajāpati is identified with the creator god Brahmā (Mhb 1.1.28–30).
- <sup>5</sup> Jan Gonda, "Prajāpati and 'Prāyaścitta,'" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1983): 49.
- <sup>6</sup> Jan Gonda, "The Popular Prajāpati," *History of Religions* 22/2 (November 1982): 131.
- <sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note the plural here: one man is allowed many wives, but a woman is allowed only one husband.
- <sup>8</sup> The *Mahābhārata*'s comment on this situation is that if a woman refuses to have children with her husband she becomes sinful (Mhb 1.113.19). The *Rāmāyaṇa* agrees with this tradition of Prativrata (1.1.91).
- <sup>9</sup> As a result, Menaka gives birth to a daughter, Sakuntala, and from her union with Dushanta the Bharata dynasty was established (Mhb 1.66–69). The story makes a point that Viśvāmītra was a *kṣatriya* and became a *brāhmaṇa*. Viśvāmītra's story is much more elaborate in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Rām). According to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, after he was involved with Menaka, Viśvāmītra realizes that he was deceived by the gods and he goes off to the northern regions to perform further ascetic practices, after which Brahmā bestows upon him the status of a Brahma sage. Indra, fearing for his own status, then sends Rāmbha to distract Viśvāmītra (Rām 1.63.20, 1.64.1). Nevertheless, in the *Mahābhārata* Viśvāmītra becomes the progenitor of the Kuru dynasty by default.

The episode of Viśvāmītra producing an offspring with Menaka is absent in the *Rāmāyaṇa* story, nor is he depicted as having sexual union with Rāmbha when he finds out about Indra's deception (Rām 1.64.10–11). Implicitly, the *Mahābhārata* affirms the purity of the *kṣatriya* lineage of the Kurus. In the *Rāmāyaṇa* it is certainly clear from the way Vaśiṣṭha treats Viśvāmītra that he (Viśvāmītra) would still have been a *kṣatriya* (before becoming a *brāhmaṇa*) (Rām

1.52.6, where Viśvāmītra is referred to as *rājānam* Viśvāmītram; in verse 7 Vaśiṣṭha clearly addresses him as *rājān* when inquiring about his welfare).

In another narrative, the *Mahābhārata* also affirms that marriage between a *kṣatriya* and a *brāhmaṇa* is legitimate; e.g., the marriage of Yayāti (a *kṣatriya*) and Devayāni (daughter of a *brāhmaṇa*) (Mbh 1.77). In another story that appears earlier in the epic the very same celestial Menaka has another child, a daughter, by a Gandharava king, Viśvavasū. She was called Prāmadavara and was raised by the sage Sthūlakeśa; later she is married to Ruru (son of Prāmati), the great grandson of the sage Bhrigu (Mbh 1.8). The *Mahābhārata* is replete with stories of sexual union between humans and celestials, as though the two worlds have constantly coalesced.

<sup>10</sup> The *Rāmāyaṇa* version of the encounter of Viśvāmītra and Menaka attributes it to the gods (*surānām karma*) in general and not particularly to Indra (Rām 1.63.11).

<sup>11</sup> Pāṇḍu could not father children because of a curse placed on him by a sage who was having sexual intercourse with his wife in the form of an antelope, and was killed by Pāṇḍu's arrow. (The idea of taking the forms of deer/antelope as a medium to have sexual intercourse, either among the gods or among humans, seems to occur infrequently and does not involve modern ethical issues surrounding such images.) Note the underlying theme of Rudra's arrow piercing Prajāpati in the form of antelope, and Pāṇḍu's arrow piercing the brahman and his wife in the form of antelope. In both cases, the sexual act has not yet been completed. The seed is withheld. In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* account, Prajāpati's seed (semen) is preserved by the gods to produce the other creatures. In the case of the epic narrative, the brahman's seed is withheld, which creates a consequence for Pāṇḍu being deprived of his seed entirely, thus requiring the gods to intervene later to offer their seed. The sage curses Pāṇḍu: because he interrupted their sexual intercourse and thereby prevented the creation of progeny, he, too, will face the same fate if he has intercourse with his wives (Mbh 1.109.50–30)

Compare this with the story of Śiva and Uma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, as told by Viśvāmītra to Rāma. The gods, fearing that Śiva's prolonged intercourse with Uma will result in progeny that might fill the whole world and destroy it, request Śiva to hold his semen within himself. But Śiva has already reached the stage of ejaculation and needs to deposit the overflowing semen somewhere, so he spills it onto the earth, on the gods' recommendation. The place where the semen was deposited becomes a reed lake from which Skanda emerges (because he was suckled by the celestial Krittikas, Skanda is also known as Kārtikeya). In the meantime, Uma, upset about the interruption of her intercourse with Śiva, which deprives her of having a son, promptly places a curse on all the gods that they cannot have children with their wives. She also places a curse on the goddess of the earth that she will be wife to many and will not have happiness from her children (Rām 1.36.20–24).

<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to establish whether the wife-stealing Vaśiṣṭha in this story is the same figure as in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the family priest of King Dasaratha, hailed as the best of sages (*munisārdulam*) (Rām 2.3.5). It's as if there is a shortage of sages, as seemingly sages with the very same names appear again and again,

- not only in the two epics but also in various other *Purāṇa* texts. The Vaśiṣṭa of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is portrayed as most virtuous. Viśvāmītra gives weapons to Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa* (Rām 1.27.2 ff) and to Karṇa in the *Mahābhārata*.
- <sup>13</sup> Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi discusses the inversion of symbols, especially in the context of erotic depictions, in “The Female Lingam: Interchangeable Symbols and Paradoxical Associations of Hindu Gods and Goddesses (and Comments and Reply),” *Current Anthropology* 21/1 (February 1980): 45–68.
- <sup>14</sup> Stella Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture in The Philadelphia Museum of Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1961), p. 19.
- <sup>15</sup> Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture in The Philadelphia Museum of Art*, p. 24.
- <sup>16</sup> Ralph Slotten, “Exoteric and Esoteric Modes of Apprehension,” *Sociological Analysis* 38/3 (Autumn 1977): 193.
- <sup>17</sup> Paul B. Courtright, *Ganesa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kali Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Rāmakṛṣṇa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); James W. Laine, *Śivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).
- <sup>18</sup> G. P. Deshpande, “Polity and Culture in the Wake of Ayodhya,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28/6 (February 6, 1993): 217.
- <sup>19</sup> Slotten, “Exoteric and Esoteric Modes of Apprehension,” p. 186.
- <sup>20</sup> Charles H. Capwell, “The Esoteric Belief of the Bauls of Bengal,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 33/2 (February 1974): 255–264.
- <sup>21</sup> In Telugu: *śrīdevivaṅkaku cilipigācūḍaku; alamēlumaṅgaku alukarāṅyaku; muddhu satuliddarini iruvaipulājerci; muripiṅci lāliṅci mucchaṭalatēci // seṣaśailāvāsa //*.
- <sup>22</sup> Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).
- <sup>23</sup> Chetan Bhatt, *Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies, and Modern Myths* (New York: Berg Publications, 2001).
- <sup>24</sup> Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians and Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- <sup>25</sup> S. Radhakṛṣṇan, “Hindu Dharma,” *International Journal of Ethics* 33/1 (1922): 1–22.
- <sup>26</sup> See, among a host of recent books discussing business ethics for modern times, Arti Dhand, “The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma: Quizzing the Ideals of Hinduism,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 30/3 (Fall 2002): 347–372; Bina Gupta, “‘Bhagavad Gītā’ as Duty and Virtue Ethics: Some Reflections,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 34/3 (September 2006): 373–395; Arvind Sharma, “The Puruṣārthas: An Axiological Exploration of Hinduism,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 27/2 (Summer 1999): 223–256.
- <sup>27</sup> Brian A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- <sup>28</sup> Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse*, p. 27.



- <sup>29</sup> See, for example, Gupta, “‘Bhagavad Gītā’ as Duty and Virtue Ethics: Some Reflections.”
- <sup>30</sup> Martin I. Haug points out, in *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa of Rigveda* (Allahabad: Sudindra Nath Vasu, 1922), p. 148:
- [T]he mentioning of the word *papman* in connection with Prajāpati, was, no doubt, regarded by the author, as very inauspicious. Even the incestuous act committed by Prajāpati, he does not call *pāpa*, sin, or *doṣa*, fault, but only *akritam*, “what ought not to be done,” which is the very milder term by which a crime can be mentioned.
- <sup>31</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Genesis and Structure of the Religious Field,” Jenny B. Burnside, Craig Calhoun, and Leah Florence, trans., *Comparative Social Research* 13 (1991): 1–44.
- <sup>32</sup> Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London: Equinox, 2007), p. 58.
- <sup>33</sup> Mhb 1:69:22–25: *aśvamedha sahasraṃ ca satyaṃ ca tulayā dhṛtam aśvamedha sahasrād dhi satyam eva viśiṣyate*.

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