

**Ambiences of Hinduism in the Wild West of America:**

**Perspectives from Two Citadels,**

**The Grand Canyon and Las Vegas**

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*Overture*

There is no more Hindu city in America than Las Vegas, and never has nature been more imbued with the culture of Hinduism than at the Grand Canyon. This must appear to be a strange and wild proposition. Benares. Puri. Hardwar. These are among the cities that one associates predominantly with Hinduism, and never has Las Vegas graced that list; and when one thinks of Hinduism and the natural world, it is the majestic Ganges, or the equally holy Narmada, that fork their way into the consciousness. What are these paroxysms of nature and culture, and how can we begin to unravel the riddle of Hinduism in the American West? What can an ancient faith possibly have to do with the vacuum, the emptiness of more than single intent, of the vast spaces of the American imagination?

*Adagio*

Hinduism in the United States shows every sign of being a flourishing religion. Hindu communities in the principal metropolitan regions have registered spectacular growth, and the greatest testimony to the success of the Hindu community is the spurt in temple-building witnessed over the last ten years, and the rise of numerous Hindu associations. At least a dozen new Hindu temples are established in the U.S. every year, and increasingly the artisans who are commissioned to carry out the elaborate carvings are flown in from India. Though the engineers might well be Americans, or (as is more likely) Indians resident in the U.S., the specifications for the construction of the buildings and the images of the deities are provided by the *silpasastras*, ancient Indian

manuals on temple architecture. Today Hindu temples, such as the one in Lemont, Illinois, which was funded largely by the Greater Hindu Association of Chicago,<sup>1</sup> attract devotees in the thousands, and a large city like Chicago has as many as seventy organizations of Indians, many of them catering to the needs of Hindu worshippers, or otherwise aimed at the cultivation of an ancient faith in a young country.

In thinking of the present condition of Hinduism, or of the future of the faith in the U.S., or even of places with which one might associate Hinduism, neither Las Vegas nor the Grand Canyon would readily come to anyone's mind. These are not metropolitan centers with concentrations of Hindus, or centers to which Hindus are driven in pursuit of their faith. No well-known Hindu saints or teachers are known to have passed through these areas; nor have any Hindu, or quasi-Hindu organizations, such as the Vivekananda Center, the Self-Realization Fellowship, the Hare Krsnas, or the Vedic University of America, installed their headquarters in Vegas or the Grand Canyon. Indeed, perhaps no place has seemed as far removed from Hinduism as Las Vegas, and it must be an odd Hindu who finds Las Vegas conducive to ecstatically delivering himself or herself up to God. It was surely not a place like Las Vegas that the teachers of the faith had in mind when they described the experience of *samadhi*, absorption in the transcendental unity of Brahman, or when they advocated the retreat to forest hermitages or ashrams for the spiritual upliftment of the mind and the contemplation of the infinite. For its part, the Grand Canyon seems to be a piece of that large expanse of land and geological formations, now covering very substantial parts of Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico, which have become the mecca for tourists, from America and abroad alike, hungering for a vision of nature's majesty, willing (howsoever briefly) to be humbled in the presence of something much greater than anything that could be made by human

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<sup>1</sup> See Robin Sheffield, "Home of the gods", *Chicago Tribune* (29 December 1994), Sec. 5, p. 1, 13, 15. I am grateful to my brother Anil for this reference.

minds. The Grand Canyon is that impossible thing, a gift: but in all this there is no necessary, or even likely, association with Hinduism.

It is greatly reasonable, nonetheless, that in thinking of Las Vegas, one's attention is brought to bear on the Grand Canyon. Though the two are commonly believed to stand on either side of the culture-nature divide, their proximity is underlined by most maps, and as the crow flies, the two are less than one hundred miles apart. Bus and air tours of the Grand Canyon are operated mainly from Las Vegas, and the two places are routinely advertised as part of one tourist package. It was one kind of gamble and the thirst for gold which drove the white man increasingly westward, and which led in time to the exploration of the Canyon; and it is the same gambling spirit which compels one to Las Vegas. Visitors seem almost naturally to gravitate from one spot to the other, from one kind of fullness to another, from one kind of excess (or waste, as some would have it) to another. It is Western man's dread of emptiness, that dreadful hate of 'waste' and celebration of productivity, that demonic desire to impregnate emptiness, which led to the making of Las Vegas. Yet the fullness of Las Vegas must appear at other times to be the expenditure of excess, the making of another kind of emptiness, and so from there one proceeds to the emptiness of the great chasm and to the plenitude of being. There is nothing there, but perhaps in that nothingness there is the fullness of the void: thus nature's 'self-impregnating' of itself, as if in ironical demonstration of the cliched truth of that aphorism, "Nature abhors a vacuum".

#### *Andante*

Among the most prominent of the explorers whose name was henceforth to be associated with the Grand Canyon was Clarence E. Dutton, Captain of Ordnance in the U.S. Army. From 1785 to 1881, Dutton spent part of each year on detached duty as a geologist in the plateaus of Utah and Arizona, and it is from these trips that a number of volumes, offering a connected account of the physical geography and geology of the region, emerged. *The Physical Geology of the Grand Canon District* and *The Tertiary*

*History of the Grand Canon District* both appeared in 1882, and the latter remains the most interesting, and in some respects, comprehensive account of the Grand Canyon area. Despite some setbacks, owing to political intervention in the work of the Geological Survey, Dutton went on to have a brilliant career as a volcanist and seismologist, recognized as something of a founding father in these fields in the U.S.

It was Dutton, in any case, who decided to give most of the various peaks and buttes in the Grand Canyon their extraordinary names. Naming is almost never innocent, as the history of colonialism amply suggests, and Columbus and the conquistadors who followed him claimed the lands they 'discovered' in the names of the monarches they served, and in so doing renamed them. The Spanish party under Garcia Lopez de Cardenas that was the first European party to partly descend into the great chasm described the Canyon as an *arroyo*, but we do not know the name by which the Hopi, Zuni, or Ansazi Indians referred to the Canyon, or if they even thought of it as 'Grand'. Three of the men who almost made their way down to the Colorado river thought that the "boulders" they saw from below were "taller than the great tower of Seville."<sup>2</sup>

It is not Seville, but the Himalayas, that Dutton was thinking of when his explorations carried him into the Canyon. He was to note with considerable annoyance that the name of Grand Canyon had been "repeatedly infringed for purposes of advertisement. The canon of the Yellowstone has been called 'The Grand Canon'; the more "flagrant piracy" was committed when the gorge of the Arkansas River in Colorado became known as "The Grand Canon of Colorado". "These river valleys are certainly very pleasing and picturesque," Dutton conceded, "but there is no more comparison between them and the mighty chasm of the Colorado River than there is between the Alleghenies or Trosachs and the Himalayas."<sup>3</sup> Nor did Dutton think that anything in

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Hanbury-Tenison, ed., *The Oxford Book of Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 239.

<sup>3</sup> Clarence E. Dutton, *Tertiary History of the Grand Canon District with Atlas*, Monographs of the United States Geological Survey, Volume II (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882; reprint ed., Santa

one's experience of Europe prepared one for the Grand Canyon, which he was willing to pronounce "by far the most sublime of all earthly spectacles": "The lover of nature, whose perceptions have been trained in the Alps, in Italy, Germany, or New England . . . would enter this strange region with a shock, and dwell there for a time with a sense of oppression, and perhaps with horror." The Canyon was "not to be comprehended in a day or a week, nor even in a month", and only with intense contemplation and study would "the meaning and spirit of that marvelous scenery" unfold.<sup>4</sup>

If Dutton found comparisons with the Canyon's scenery inadequate, he also appears to have had that thought that the various sights and vistas were not to be encompassed within a conventional nomenclature. The author of a recent monograph on the Canyon states that "to overcome what he [Dutton] considered the linguistic poverty of English, he brought in new descriptive terms from Spanish, French, and even native Hawaiian and scrapped stock Alpine analogies for striking allusions to architectural forms, even those of the Orient."<sup>5</sup> But what were these 'Oriental' architectural forms, and what could Dutton have known of them? And whose Orient is being adverted to? In the mid- to late-nineteenth century, few Europeans or Americans thought of Hindu art or architecture as anything but worthless, and the images of Indian deities were, in the words of one scholar, "much maligned monsters".<sup>6</sup> Little is known of what impelled Dutton to ascribe 'Oriental' names to some of the buttes and peaks in the Grand Canyon, but he did: and so it is that the visitor today may 'worship' at the temples of Mencius, Confucius, and the Buddha, and at these Hindu temples: Vishnu; Shiva; Brahma; Rama; and Manu.

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Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1977), p. 2. I will, in all subsequent citations and references, spell "Canon" as "Canyon". I would like to thank my student, Mitch Numark, for his assistance with obtaining material on the Grand Canyon.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 141-42.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen J. Pyne, *Dutton's Point: An Intellectual History of the Grand Canyon*, Monograph Number 5 (Grand Canyon, Arizona: Grand Canyon Natural History Association, 1982), p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

Dutton's choice of names, insofar as he had decided the Hindu Gods furnished the Canyon with some critical esthetic meaning, might well appear to be very reasonable. Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma constitute what is called the Hindu trinity: as Brahma is the Creator and Shiva the Destroyer, so Vishnu holds the fort in the middle as the Preserver. Of Vishnu's ten incarnations, Rama and Krishna are the two most well-known ones, and the story of Rama, as embodied in the epic Ramayana, is the most widely known story among Indians. It is Rama's victory over Ravana, the demon king of (Sri) Lanka, that provides the occasion for the grand celebration of Diwali, the so-called Festival of Lights that encapsulates and distills Hindu mythology. Indeed, the story of the Ramayana travelled far beyond India's frontiers, and ancient traditions of the performance of the Ramayana are still found in Thailand and Indonesia, as well as in Indian diasporic communities in such places as Trinidad, Guyana, and Fiji.<sup>7</sup> Finally, Manu is held by Hindus to be the ancient law-giver, and of the various shastras or law-books, none was as widely influential or prescriptive as the *Laws of the Manu*.

Had Dutton assigned the names of the great Vedic gods, such as Indra or Agni, or the names of deities -- Ganesh, Kali, Durga -- more popular in vernacular traditions to the peaks and buttes of the Grand Canyon, he might well elicited comments of utter bewilderment. Dutton's own account of the Canyon furnishes some clues as to how he was thinking. From Point Sublime, where Dutton spent many hours (thus "Point Sublime"), one could detect a long and rather wide promontory that separates the Shinumo Amphitheater from what Dutton called the "Hindoo Amphitheater".<sup>8</sup> He does not say why he called it the "Hindoo Amphitheater", but his remarks on Vishnu's Temple are rather more revealing. Noting the presence of a butte more than 5,000 feet high, "so admirably designed and so exquisitely designed that the sight of it must call forth an

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<sup>7</sup> For some poignant and movingly evocative remarks on the Ramleela, or the dramatization of the Ramayana, in Trinidad, see the Nobel Lecture of Derek Walcott, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory", *New Republic* (28 December 1992), pp. 26-32.

<sup>8</sup> Dutton, *Tertiary History of the Grand Canyon*, p. 169.

expression of wonder and delight from the most apathetic beholder", Dutton found this "finest butte of the chasm" to have "a surprising resemblance to an Oriental pagoda": "We named it Vishnu's Temple."<sup>9</sup> In this species of reasoning, a Vaishnavite temple is no doubt an instance of "an Oriental pagoda", to be amalgamated easily into a generic form of Oriental temple architecture, and until well into the twentieth century, Americans routinely described Hindu temples as 'pagodas': one need not snivel at this kind of Orientalist ignorance. Dutton's remarks on Shiva's Temple are yet more profuse and pointed: describing it as a "gigantic mass", Dutton thought Shiva's Temple to be the "grandest of all the buttes, and the most majestic in aspect, though not the most ornate." But Shiva's face did not present the most benign aspect: the summit looked down 6,000 feet "into the dark depths of the inner abyss" over a succession of impossibly difficult ledges. The butte stands, Dutton wrote, "in the midst of a great throng of cloister-like buttes, with the same noble profiles and strong lineaments as those immediately before us, with a plexus of awful chasms between them. In such a stupendous scene of wreck it seemed as if the fabled 'Destroyer' might find an abode not wholly uncongenial."<sup>10</sup>

Dutton adopted the most popular representations of Shiva as a fearful God, and the iconography is extended so far as to suggest that the "fabled 'Destroyer'" is accompanied by lesser gods, only slightly less forbidding in their demeanor. But what of Brahma, the Hindu God who stands besides Vishnu and Shiva to constitute the trinity of God's work on this earth? The *Tertiary History* says nothing of Brahma, though the author of *Arizona Place Names*, in stating that "the fantastic shapes of many of the buttes in the Grand Canyon led to their fanciful names, [of which] Brahma Temple is an example", is forthright in advancing the view that the Brahma temple was named after "the first of the Hindu Triad, the Supreme Creator, to correspond with the Shiva

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 148, 177.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

Temple".<sup>11</sup> Dutton needed Brahma to complete his Hindu Trinity; but if we are looking for such symmetry, then was why Rama not complemented by Krishna?<sup>12</sup> There was no shortage of buttes and peaks at the Canyon, and indeed Dutton named one other butte after the main lawgiver of the Hindus, Manu.

Dutton's understanding of Hinduism was undoubtedly a text-book understanding of the faith, however remarkable it is that he should have at all have chosen the names of Hindu gods to illustrate his belief that "the splendor and grace of Nature's architecture" were never more at display than at the Grand Canyon.<sup>13</sup> As Hindu and Chinese philosophy were alien to the sensibilities of educated men read in European classics and nurtured on the truths of Christian theology, so the Canyon's unusual forms were not to be apprehended by minds weighed down by "preconceived notions" of beauty, grandeur, and aesthetic pleasure. "Forms so new to to the culture of civilized races and so strongly contrasted with those which have been the ideals of thirty generations of white men", Dutton suggested, "cannot indeed be appreciated after the study of a single hour or day." "The first conception" of them might even, Dutton thought, "not be a pleasing one."<sup>14</sup> The engineers were there to plumb the depths of the Canyon, and the book of nature was not there merely for the opening: yet in his quest for names that would reveal the inner meanings and majesty of the Canyon, Dutton had merely to repair to some received notions of Hinduism.

What was, then, the textbook view of Hinduism that Dutton encountered, and what was the intellectual backdrop to Hinduism in America? By the mid-nineteenth century, 'Hinduism' had entered the portals of some American living rooms on the east

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<sup>11</sup> Byrd H. Granger, *Grand Canyon Place Names*, illustrated by Anne Merriman Peck (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1960), p. 6, excerpted from Byrd H. Granger, *Arizona Place Names* (1960).

<sup>12</sup> That was the instinctive reaction of my mother, Shanno Devi, who -- while visiting from India -- accompanied me on the trip to Vegas and the Canyon. She found it touching that Rama had been so honored, but was baffled at the evident slight offered to Krishna.

<sup>13</sup> Dutton, *Tertiary History of the Grand Canyon*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



coast, mainly in Boston and the area around it. The phrase, 'Boston brahmins', tells many a story, but the narrative that is pertinent is of the engagement of American transcendentalism, and most particularly of Emerson and Thoreau, with the classics of Indian literature and philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Though both Emerson and Thoreau had an extraordinarily subtle understanding of Hinduism,<sup>16</sup> their knowledge was confined to some -- albeit an interesting variety -- of the classic Indian texts. They knew nothing of popular Hinduism and, needless to say, they had no awareness of the lived practices of the faith. Thus, for example, neither Emerson nor Thoreau would have been aware that worship of Brahma declined in India many centuries ago, and there are no followers of Brahma as there are of Vishnu or Shiva. All over India, there are barely a handful of temples dedicated to Brahma, and the 'dedication' of a temple to Brahma in the late nineteenth century, as was done by Dutton at the Grand Canyon, cannot be considered as nothing but anomalous. Similarly, it is striking that one of the buttes should have been named after the Indian law-giver Manu, of whom even today only a minority of educated Indians can be said to have any knowledge, and whose name would have been an altogether unknown entity among Americans in Dutton's own time, except of course to a few dedicated transcendentalists. Indeed, G. Buhler's translation of *The Laws of Manu* in the famous "Sacred Books of the East" Series did not appear in an English translation until 1886, four years after Dutton's *Tertiary History*, and one can only surmise that Dutton's familiarity with Manu (if it was Dutton who named the butte "Manu", as seems very likely) was gained from Thoreau's and Emerson's concerted efforts to lay the sayings

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<sup>15</sup> The pre-Emersonian encounter by Americans of Indian history, literature, and philosophy is enumerated, though scarcely discussed (and much less interpreted) by J. P. Rao Rayapati, *Early American Interest in Vedanta: Pre-Emersonian Interest in Vedic Literature and Vedantic Philosophy* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> See Vinay Lal, "Emerson and India" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, The Johns Hopkins University, 1982), esp. pp. 65-149; for Thoreau, there is no better source than the Tuesday chapter of his own *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). One of the few studies devoted to the transcendentalists' interest in the 'Orient' is Arthur E. Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), but this is extremely dated, Orientalist, and superficial.

of Manu before an American audience. It was in the early 1840s that Thoreau compiled excerpts from "The Laws of Menu" and had them published in *The Dial*,<sup>17</sup> the new and short-lived journal of the Transcendentalist group; and it is Manu who is being referred to in *Walden* when Thoreau praises the "Hindoo lawgiver" for his enlightened view of the human body and its functions.<sup>18</sup> As for Emerson, his journals amply testify to his view of Manu as a wise and lofty lawgiver beyond comparison: if in 1821 he was to write, "As long ago as Menu enlightened morality was taught in India", in 1836 he was adverting to "the brave maxim of the Code of Menu: 'A Teacher of the Veda should rather die with his learning than sow it in sterile soil, even though he be in grievous distress for subsistence.'"<sup>19</sup>

In having furnished some of the more striking buttes and peaks in the Grand Canyon with Hindu names, Dutton revealed (howsoever inadvertently) something of the reputation that Hinduism had acquired in America, and had given credence (in howsoever unusual a manner) to a formal and textbook interpretation of Hinduism. It is instructive that he was able, without any fanfare or loud trumpeting of the virtues of multiculturalism, to designate the monuments of America's most well-known and beloved rock formation by names that were undoubtedly exotic and remote to the American imagination. Any such endeavor today would be fraught with hazardous consequences, the cultural right heralding such acts of naming as 'politically motivated' concessions to religious and ethnic minorities. If Dutton's choice of names betrays a rather formalist and

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<sup>17</sup> "The Laws of Menu", compiled by Henry David Thoreau, reprinted from *The Dial* 3, no. 3 (January 1843):331-40, as reproduced in *Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Early Essays and Miscellanies*, eds. Joseph J. Moldenhauer and Edwin Moser (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 128-39. Both Emerson and Thoreau were relying upon the earlier English translation by Sir William Jones, *Institutes of Hindu Law, or the Ordinances of Menu, According to the Gloss of Culluca* (179), a copy of which was available in the library of Harvard College. It is from Jones that they derived their spelling of Manu as "Menu".

<sup>18</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (original ed., 1854; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Illustrated Classics, 1938), p. 188.

<sup>19</sup> R. W. Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. William H. Gilman *et al*, 15 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960-), 1:340-41 and 5:165. The partial quotation from the *Laws of Manu* is from Book II, sec. 113.

narrow view of Hinduism, he can almost be excused: indeed, it would be churlish to cavil at Dutton's ecumenical gestures. No other American place was to be associated with the names of Hindu gods to a similar extent, and so we can only ask: in what manner might Las Vegas, of all places, strengthen and extend those associations with Hinduism?

*Allegro Vivace*

A little less than two years ago, on a visit to the house of a friend in Woodland Hills, a community in the near proximity of Los Angeles, I met an Indian astrologer who described himself to me as a devout Hindu. It so transpired that his mother, also a devout Hindu in her late sixties or perhaps early seventies, had shortly before paid a long visit to her son in California. He had taken the step, rather unusual under the circumstances, of ferrying her across the country by car, an experience that she is said to have greatly enjoyed. But one place, above all, captivated her, and it is with bewilderment that this Hindu astrologer described to me the three trips that she insisted on taking to Las Vegas. It is much later, after my first visit to that city, that her enthusiastic response to Las Vegas struck me as being, far from anomalous, all too spirited and reasonable. The astrologer wouldn't say whether his mother veered towards the casino, but many legendary figures of Hindu mythology have not been averse to this indulgence. Yudhishthira in the *Mahabharata* was addicted to dice, and so gambled away his kingdom, the lives of his brothers, and even his wife. If at all the astrologer's mother sat at the gaming tables, she no doubt thought of Las Vegas as akin to the burning house of lace from which Yudhishthira and his kinsfolk effected their miraculous escape after they had been condemned to exile in the forest pursuant to his humiliating loss in gambling.

There is no Hindu temple in Las Vegas, nor is there any significant community of Hindus. It is likely that a few doctors, dentists, engineers, computer scientists, and scientists are Indians, but otherwise there is little in Vegas that would attract Indian professionals; perhaps, when the casinos conjure up new modes of

gambling, and computers become installed at the tables, use will be made of the raw talent of India's already legendary computer software specialists, mainly Hindus from South India and the metropolitan centers. But at present there is nothing in Las Vegas that overtly hints at a Hindu presence. Almost the only strikingly explicit Hindu monument in Las Vegas is a very small shrine that constitutes part of Caesar's Palace, a sumptuously lavish casino built in recent years. Ironically, this shrine is called "Brahma's Temple", and one is lifted back to the much loftier butte by that name in the Grand Canyon. One might be forgiven for thinking that a cult of Brahma's followers, eager to continue a strand of the faith long abandoned in India, have clustered in America, that last refuge of all the obscurantist possibilities thrown open by faith in religion. Or perhaps it is that Brahma, being the Creator of the Universe, had to be invoked at the commencement and conclusion of the great enterprise of gifting the most modern city in the world with the architectonic paraphernalia of classicism.

What, then, apart from "Brahma's Temple", is there in Las Vegas that makes it a city eminently Hindu in sensibility or, if I may put it this way, Hindu in possibility? Much more so than any other religion, Hinduism has lived comfortably with excess. Judging from popular representations of Hinduism, whether they be of gods and goddesses with multiple arms, Ravana with his ten heads, or of the fabled godmen of India with their knee-length beards and ash-scarred faces, excess has always appear to characterize the Hindu faith. Though Hinduism may well be associated with the asceticism of the Brahminical life and the austerical purity of the Upanishads, the Hinduism of both classical mythology and quotidian life has always revelled in excess, multiplicity, and the efflorescence of light, color, and sensation. The temptation of 'sinful things' for humans has always been a motif in the great religions, but in Hinduism temptation is not construed so much as a 'sin' (a rather Judaeo-Christian idea to begin with) as an obstacle to the acquisition of knowledge. One of the most enduring and frequently encountered stories in Indian mythology is of a great saint, a reclusive man

immersed in meditation, whose devotional practices are rudely disrupted by the appearance of a beautiful maiden. Even gods are corrupted by seductive celestial nymphs, and Brahma, the Lord of Creation, who puts illusion in the way of knowledge, is himself caught in the web of the temptations he had created for others. Thus Brahma, consumed by lust for the beautiful goddess Gayatri, created four heads, each facing one direction, so that he might view her undisturbed, not hindered by the presence of his sons. When Gayatri took to the expedient of journeying upward, Brahma put a fifth head on top; and in the words of the *Matsya Purana*, "after this Brahma lost the powers that he had acquired by asceticism."<sup>20</sup> Though it is more than likely that these stories of seductresses will only be read as expressive of the "misogynist, ascetic-oriented view of the orthodox Hindu",<sup>21</sup> in Hinduism it has always been understood that one kind of excess often leads to another, purportedly its very opposite: asceticism is conjoined with debauchery, restraint with indulgence, modesty with *eros*.

In the clichéd formulation associated with Hinduism, the world is largely illusory, though as Sankara, the philosopher of *mayavada* [the theory of illusion], was to maintain, *maya* is only unreality, the illusion by virtue of which we suppose the unreal universe as distinct from, and exterior to, Brahman, or the Supreme Spirit. The greater the multiplicity, the greater the illusion. In the popular understanding of Hinduism that prevailed in the West for a very long period of time, Hinduism is a polytheistic religion of abominable cruelty and sensuality, with a plethora of gods and goddesses, many fantastic creatures, bizarre religious practices, and permissive sexuality. The Emerson whom we encountered as an enthusiastic advocate of the great works of Hindu literature and philosophy had a rather different idea of this faith in his youth, and in 1821 he wrote a lengthy poem on "Indian Superstition", where he was to write of 'Juggernaut', a gigantic

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<sup>20</sup>*Matsya Purana* III:30-4, as cited by A. K. Ramanujan, "The Indian Oedipus", in L. Edwards and A. Dundes, eds., *Oedipus: A Folklore Casebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), p. 248.

<sup>21</sup>Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, trans. and introduction, *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 36.

chariot under which Hindus were believed to place themselves to be delivered to death, and of the practice of sati.<sup>22</sup> In 1823 he confided to his journal: "The Indian Pantheon is of prodigious size; 330 million Gods have in it each their heaven, or rather, each their parlour, in this immense 'goddery.' In quality and absurdity their superstition has nothing to match it, that is or ever was in the world."<sup>23</sup> These were the sentiments of the day, and the opinions of Thomas Macaulay, James Mill, Hegel, and countless other English and European writers coincided in the expression of the view that Hinduism was characterized by nothing more than a maddening and absurd obsession with numbers -- as in the 300 years that a king was said to have ruled, kings said to have been thirty feet high, or the thousands of years required of most mortals to free themselves of the chain of rebirths -- and an explosion, as it were, of the senses, as in Macaulay's caricature of Indian geography as "made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter."<sup>24</sup> Another strand of European representations of Indian absurdities fixated on religious and social practices such as hook-swinging and the burning of widows, or the eccentricities of naked holy men who walked on burning coals or slept on beds of nails. These practices of "half-naked fakirs", the expression Churchill used in his attempt to savage no less a person than Gandhi, were the stock in trade of Western representations of Hinduism.<sup>25</sup>

The place of Orientalism in Western representations of Hinduism has been too well established to require any commentary. But, in condemning imperialist forms of knowledge, we need not commit the egregious error of overlooking the sensuous nature of Hinduism, which is undoubtedly one of its most attractive features, or its commitment to excess. Why do Hindu deities have a multiplicity of arms and legs? Why is there a

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<sup>22</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Indian Superstition*, ed. Kenneth Walter (Hanover, New Hampshire: The Friends of the Dartmouth Library, 1954).

<sup>23</sup>Idem, *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 2:195.

<sup>24</sup>T. B. Macaulay, "Minute on English Education", in *Selected Writings*, ed. John Clive (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 243 (para 13).

<sup>25</sup>David Cannadine, ed., *Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat: The Speeches of Winston Churchill* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989), p. 103.

necklace of skulls around the neck of Kali? Followers of monistic and non-dualistic Hinduism have urged us to understand these forms of multiplicity in the same manner in which democracies crave for the acceptance of such political sentiments "e pluribus unum" or "Out of Many, One People."<sup>26</sup> But these interpretations can scarcely contain the excess that refuses to be accommodated or domesticated. What is, indeed, that orgy of color that is witnessed in the playing of Holi (the 'festival of colors', as it is called in English), or the orgy of light that is witnessed in the enactment each year of the destruction by explosion of the effigies of Ravana and his kinfolk, or the orgy of sensation so lovingly and minutely evoked in the numerous ancient manuals of love? What could be the point of enumerating with precise and clinical detachment the most outlandish sexual positions if not to indulge in a riot of excess, an excess that knew itself as play? What is the meaning, other than the most obvious metaphysical one of the manifestation of the Divine Presence, of that particular excess that when Yashoda opens the mouth of her baby Krishna, in order to take out the mud that he had swallowed, she sees the thousand forms of Vishnu?<sup>27</sup>

If it is accepted that Hinduism has woven an elaborate narrative around the idea of illusion, and that, furthermore, excess is understood within the faith as one trope of approaching the Divine, then it must perforce also be clear why, to the Hindu astrologer's mother and myself alike, Las Vegas seems to be the city to which the Hindu is most attuned, and which promises most by way of evoking sentiments of the faith. Las Vegas is nothing if it is not the city of excess. Here are the testimonials of those who thought they would be modern-day Caesars or Egyptian Pharaohs. At the shopping arcade at Caesar's Palace, the fake sky renders day and night indistinguishable; at the Luxor, one can sit in the Pyramid Cafe next to a fake river, and in one of the driest

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<sup>26</sup>These are the national mottos, respectively, of the United States and Jamaica.

<sup>27</sup>This story bears comparison to Arjuna's experience of the Universal Form of Krishna when God decides to unveil himself to his awe-struck student: see Chapter XI of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

regions in the United States one can imagine oneself frolicking in water. If one were fussy about one's room, and wanted the one adjoining, one could try the MGM Hotel, the largest in the world with 5,000 rooms; or one could witness piracy on the seas at Treasure Island, and capture on films computerized volcanic eruptions. Head up the Strip to the aptly and yet redundantly named Mirage, and one can feast one's eyes on two large white Bengal tigers behind a glass in a Henri Rousseau-style jungle. And what of the din of millions of slot machines, the tasteless, ubiquitous all-you-can-eat buffets, the large collection of Liberace's costumes (many weighing 125 pounds), the drive-in marriages, the waitresses in various states of thematic undress, the monstrously large flashing neon signs, and the sheer orgy of light and color, the explosion of a thousand suns, as one moves along the Strip?

As the casinos pound us in from all sides, they relentlessly circulate the impression that there is only the present, the transcendent present of the here and the now. It scarcely requires keen eyes to observe that casinos are not time-keepers, as though the cliched representation of Hinduism as a religion without linear notions of time needed instantiation. It is perfectly apposite that as in the grandiose barrenness of the Grand Canyon Dutton was reminded of Hindu Gods, so the orgiastic excess of Las Vegas should bring forth images of Krishna's Vishvarupa or Universal Form, Krishna's lila or dance with the gopis under nights of full moon, Durga riding the tiger and going for the kill, Kali ecstatically waving her arms and legs and letting her necklace of skulls glisten. But whereas Dutton's Hinduism was of the text-book variety, the kind that 'modern' Hindus in America, Britain, Canada, and even urban India so eagerly embrace, Las Vegas brings the true worshipper to a more vibrant understanding of the faith. One begins with illusion and may perhaps graduate from ignorance to knowledge; nowhere else in the world are the senses so relentlessly attacked and do the demons rush in to stake their claims. Here there is no sanctuary, except the inner self of which Hinduism has always spoken; but perchance as this self is no more distinct from the outer self than the seed from the tree,



one recognizes that in the noisome and nauseous splendor of Las Vegas Hinduism will find its possibilities and teachings fulfilled.