

Introduction

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“There is no science or art, no craft or skill, no yoga and karma that is outside the purview of drama” says Bharata in *Nāṭyaśāstra* (I. 116; Gupta 1999: 23). This special issue of *Nidān: An International Journal for the Study of Hinduism* looks at the Kali Yuga as something akin to a cosmological drama that unfolds in different fields of narrative possibilities and exhibits a “palpable tension between contingency and determinism” (Kloetzli and Hildebeitel 2004: 582). The *yugās*, or world ages of Hindu traditions, progressively decrease in length and quality as they move from the Kṛta Yuga (the perfect age) to the Tretā Yuga, Dvāpara Yuga, and Kali Yuga (the age of discord).

The Kali Yuga’s relationship to and implications for human agency are particularly complex; indeed, in some instances these may appear quite paradoxical. On the one hand, it appears that Hinduism’s *yuga* theory is deterministic in the sense that it frames this trajectory in terms of a predestined and catastrophic end. Understanding Kali Yuga as part of a pre-programmed cosmic design that moves inexorably towards a sure-to-occur destructive conclusion generates a perspective that comfortably accepts diminishing virtues and degenerating values as a natural sequence.

On the other hand, however, by placing the Kali Yuga within the domain of the four-*yuga* cycle known as the *mahāyuga* (great *yuga*), which lasts for a total of 4,320,000 human years, and assigning the Kali Yuga a life span of only one-tenth of this period (Kloetzli and Hildebeitel 2004: 563), Hinduism relativizes the Kali Yuga’s wretchedness, neutralizes its sting, and thus renders it a contingent reality that can be endured. Hinduism’s cyclical view of time demonstrates that the past, present, and future together comprise an unbroken chain that is destined to be repeated as

the universe advances from one *yuga* to the next, each more degenerate than the last, and culminating in the degraded Kali Yuga.

Against this backdrop, the five articles in this volume focus on contemporary understandings of the Kali Yuga drawn from disparate parts of India – Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Himachal Pradesh, and New Delhi – and explore their implications for the roles of human and divine agency in our present times. Grounded in fresh ethnographic research, vernacular sources, and new media, these contributions examine how the Kali Yuga is invoked and described in varied contexts, offering a contemporary set of perspectives on this age-old concept. Such perspectives add important new dimensions to our understanding of Hindu cosmology and conceptions of time and suggest novel directions in the study of contemporary Hindu traditions, particularly because the scholarly literature has tended to focus on the descriptions available in Sanskrit textual sources such as the *Purāṇas*, *Mahābhārata*, and various *dharma* texts.

Taken collectively, these ethnographic examples reveal the heterogeneity, diversity, and fluidity that characterize local understandings of and engagements with the Kali Yuga paradigm, as well as the ways in which they may relate to, revise, or recontextualize the classic *yuga* schema as outlined in Hindu textual traditions. That is, our authors highlight ways in which local understandings are informed and influenced by depictions of the Kali Age found in Sanskrit sources and also point out where these textual portrayals may be recast and repositioned. In presenting situated discourses about the most degenerate of the Hindu world ages from different regions of India, these articles richly illustrate specific ways in which the Kali Yuga idiom is appropriated and reinterpreted to serve as a dynamic and locally meaningful framework through which actors respond to the myriad social, political, economic and religious changes they witness and experience in contemporary India.

Amy L. Allocco's article, 'The Blemish of "Modern Times": Snakes, Planets, and the Kaliyugam,' (pp. 1-21) alerts us to a set of creative interpretations of the Kali Yuga underway in contemporary South India. She shows how *nāga dōṣam*, a negative astrological condition, is associated with and understood differently in Kali Yuga times, when it is regarded as an increasingly prevalent affliction that the selfish and insincere people effectively bring upon on themselves, rather than simply as the result of killing or harming of a snake in this or a previous life as is more traditionally believed. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork,

Allocco argues that individuals invoke the concepts of the Kali Yuga and *nāga dōṣam* in tandem in an attempt to negotiate the challenges posed by a range of recent social, religious, and economic changes in their contemporary situations. More specifically, she demonstrates how the “perceived changes in degrees of ritual observance and in women’s roles as well as changing relationships with the natural world in urbanizing, globalizing India are understood both as partially responsible for the recent rise in *nāga dōṣam* and as uniquely characteristic of the Kali Yuga” (p. 1) and shows how both of these categories function as effective indigenous idioms to account for disconcerting developments that beset modern times. Allocco highlights the agency of individual religious actors as displayed through the innovative practices and performances that are incorporated into *nāga dōṣam*’s ritual repertoire and deemed “uniquely appropriate to – and even mandated by – the perplexities of the Kali Yuga and the vicissitudes of modern times, thus demonstrating that the fourth cosmic age is invoked and deployed in a range of ways to address, interpret, and respond to changing contexts” (p. 18).

In a contribution focused on Śani in modern Delhi, Carla Bellamy (pp. 22-41) shows that although this planetary deity was traditionally regarded as lord of degenerate and inauspicious phenomena that can easily be related to the Kali Yuga, contemporary Śani devotees are producing new meanings and configuring their worship in innovative ways. Instead of following the traditional practice of using mustard oil to absorb, contain, and transfer Śani’s inauspicious influence to *ḍakauts*, who have long served as Śani’s priestly intermediaries, contemporary devotees are anointing Śani in the same oil that they have cast their own reflections in and thus transferring his maleficent influence back to the planetary deity himself. This shift signals that “the economy in which Śani operates has changed” (p. 38) and may be indicative of broader changes in modern Indian conceptualizations of selfhood. Further, devotees today no longer consider Śani a malevolent planetary deity but rather recast his role for our present age such that Śani is represented as a deity worth patronizing because he is the lord of karma, fearsome enough to take action in these corrupt and degenerate times. Bellamy deftly weaves what she has learned during fieldwork carried out at several new Śani temples in Delhi with the narratives of modern, urban Śani devotees in order to demonstrate how the contemporary worship of Śani is both informed by and constitutes a sensible response to the enormous changes in the Indian economy that have resulted from its ongoing liberalization.

Ehud Halperin's article (pp. 42-64) on contemporary understanding of the Kali Yuga in the Kullu Valley in Himachal Pradesh continues in a similar vein by showing that while this concept "shapes villagers' views of their present conditions" (p. 62) it is itself also reworked in the process. His contribution highlights how contemporary Hindus residing in the Western Himalayas employ the Kali Yuga framework to process and respond to the rapid changes engendered by tourism and globalization. While they consider the present time to be a period of moral degradation, collapsing governmental and social order, and the utter destruction of the environment, they exercise agency by introducing several significant modifications to the received Kali Yuga schema. Indeed, these villagers redraw the Kali Yuga's temporality to better correspond to the unprecedented recent changes that their region has witnessed in recent times: many collapse the four-age schema of eons into two, thereby constructing a dualistic view of time in which the universe abruptly progressed from the perfectly positive Satya Yuga to the horribly negative Kali Yuga. In addition, some of them shortened the Kali Yuga's time span considerably to appear as if it originated merely a few decades ago (just as some of Allocco's interlocutors in Tamil Nadu did also), rather than some 5,000 years ago or following the death of Krishna in the *Mahābhārata* war. Further, Halperin found that Kulluvians explicitly associated the Kali Yuga with the local goddess Haḍimbā, who in effect becomes the presiding deity of this degenerate age, and whose demonic origins and current identification with the goddess Kālī align with its wild and violent character. These modifications have implications for villagers' self-perceptions and reflections on human agency, as well as their view on their place in the broader Indian cultural grid.

In the article titled "Alternative Discourses of Kali Yuga in Ayyā Vaḷi" James Ponniah (pp. 65-87) demonstrates how Vaikundar (b. 1809), the founder of the Ayyā Vaḷi movement, a subaltern religious phenomenon well-known in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu, reframed the Kali Yuga concept and infused it with unique meanings relevant to his liberative vision. Vaikundar and his adherents, the erstwhile Canars of the Southern Travancore kingdom, identified discrimination against persons from low castes as a sign of the Kali Yuga and exercised a particular kind of agency by following the religious practices and ethical norms of self-dignity. At the same time they also spoke of Vaikundar inaugurating a Dharma Yuga, wherein *dharma* would include uplifting the lowly and making everyone part of one universal race, occurrences that would signal the Kali Yuga

according to Sanskritic Hinduism. Thus, Vaikundar significantly redefined dominant Sanskritic discourses surrounding the Kali Yuga to fit into an egalitarian alternative framework of Dharma Yuga wherein the elimination of all forms of social discriminations becomes a promising and necessary way forward to reinstate the lost *dharma*.

In the volume's final article, "The Kali Yuga as 'the Wealth-Pursuit Era': Perceptions of Patronage at a Hindu Shrine," R. Jeremy Saul (pp. 88-108) argues that the local identification of the Kali Yuga as the Artha Yuga, or era of wealth, in Sālāsar, Rajasthan seems to foster and encourage the corruption already prevalent in present-day India. He describes how merchants and businessmen who have benefited from the post-1990 liberal market economic boom may simultaneously engage in careful tax-evasion and turn to Bālājī – a local form of Hanumān (monkey God)¹ for protection. This deity is regarded as a refuge for devotees in these turbulent times, a designation which serves multiple functions for Mārvāḍīs and others. For example, enormous donations offered to Bālājī as a sign of faith also confer status and earn special kinds of privileges, thus establishing and maintaining conspicuous caste-class social and economic divide. Bālājī's worship by Mārvāḍī migrants enables them to rediscover their lost affinity to their places of origin and recognize Bālājī as the deity linked with their ancestral land which, in turn, facilitates the creation and maintenance of a community-based identity and wide-reaching networks centered on Bālājī in India's cities. The community's patronage of the Sālāsar Bālājī temple and its attendant fame has had several consequences, including the huge surge in the price of land surrounding the temple precincts. This price surge and the economy of privileges, favors, and tax advantages that operates in Sālāsar are among the outcomes that some of Saul's informants viewed as indicators of a degenerative age.

In the local understandings of and discourses around the Kali Yuga discussed in each of these articles, we can detect individuals' and communities' creative exercise of agency in response to the devolving standards and circumstances of their present realities. Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitenen have noted that "the most important function of the notion of these four Ages seems to lie in their negative moral judgment levelled on present society" (1978: 21), and the informants

¹ Incidentally Bālājī is also the name the Marwadi community in particular and North Indians in general use to refer to Lord Sri Venkateswara in Tirupati.

whose perspectives are included in the contributions to this special issue bear out this observation. Indeed, many of them articulate pointed critiques of the changes in the world around them, whether these are attributable to the processes of globalization, economic liberalization, urbanization, or modernization. Our authors have captured a wide range of negative perceptions about humans' shifting relationships with one another, nature, and the gods/goddesses, as well as varied perspectives about what entities might be working in tandem with the Kali Yuga to be responsible for these troubling developments. This fourth and most degraded of the world ages functions as a heuristic device to categorize contemporary disorder that, while enshrined in the Sanskrit textual tradition, clearly evidences flexibility and innovation. The contemporary and context-based discourses on the Kali Yuga may both be shaped by Sanskritic models and digress from these text-based sources, demonstrating the tradition's tendency toward selective appropriation and adaptation.

Drawn from disparate regions of the Indian subcontinent, these current understandings of the Kali Yuga have developed in dialogue with the transformations and dislocations that increasingly characterize Indian life. And shed new light on connections to elite understandings of the world ages and cosmic cycles; contemporary interactions with astrology and the planetary deities; new religious movements and theologies; ritual practice and religious devotion; and an array of gender, economic, and ecological issues.

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The Blemish of “Modern Times”: Snakes, Planets, and the Kaliyugam¹

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in South India, this article traces out the connections that devotees, astrologers, priests, and other Hindu ritual specialists make between *nāga dōṣam* (“snake blemish,” a negative astrological condition) and the Kali Yuga, the fourth and most degenerate world age according to Hindu cosmology. These parallel discourses are intimately related to the changes in religious observance, values, and social roles that informants describe as associated with “modern times” (by which they mean the present and the quite recent past), and demonstrate the ways in which individuals are using the indigenous frameworks of *nāga dōṣam* and the Kali Yuga in order to confront and respond to challenging contemporary realities. Three elements that informants foregrounded in their narratives – namely declining religious practice, shifting gender expectations, and ecological destruction – are explored in some depth. Perceived changes in **degrees of ritual observance and in women’s roles as well as** changing relationships with the natural world in urbanizing, globalizing India are understood both as partially responsible for the recent rise in *nāga dōṣam* and as uniquely characteristic of the Kali Yuga, suggesting that these cosmological and astrological models work in tandem as indigenous idioms for categorizing and accounting for the anxiety-producing situations and disconcerting realities that increasingly confront people in these modern times.

Key Words: *nāga dōṣam, Kali Yuga, South India, Hinduism, modernity*

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the 2012 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting as part of a panel that I organized titled “It’s The End of the World as We Know It’: Contemporary Understandings of the Kali Yuga.” I owe thanks to Joyce B. Flueckiger for her generous response to the four papers presented in this session and to Brian K. Pennington for his feedback on this article; I am grateful to have each of them as my ongoing conversation partners.

Nāga Dōṣam: The "Chief Illness" of the Kali Yuga

It was with high expectations that I climbed the narrow staircase leading to **Visveshwaran's office one summer afternoon in 2011.** A scholar of Tamil Śaiva traditions, Visveshwaran had agreed to meet to discuss my new research project focusing on the ritual relationships that some South Indian Hindus maintain with the spirits of their deceased relatives. We had first met five years earlier, when I sought out his expertise on *nāga* (snake) worship traditions and the malefic horoscopic condition called *nāga dōṣam* (see Allocco 2009).² But, over the course of our several-hours-long conversation, it became evident that Visveshwaran had other topics on his mind. He repeatedly steered the discussion back to the numerous negative changes he sees in contemporary Indian society and lamented the fact that people are increasingly selfish, lazy, and greedy, preferring instant gratification to genuine effort and hard work. **Visveshwaran's** litany of complaints included that too many Hindus nowadays fail to observe *śrāddha* rites (ritual offerings to deceased lineage members), prefer online to real-time *pūjā* (devotional worship), and opt to pay others to perform rituals on their behalves rather than do them themselves. In his estimation, wives **have become "modern,"** priests **"commercial,"** and sons more interested in watching TV than in caring for their aged parents.³ According to Visveshwaran:

There is a connection between the *kaliyugam* [the most degenerate age in Hindu cosmology] and the things that are happening today. In these *kaliyugam* times *dharma* [duty/right conduct, a concept that is often anthropomorphized] stands on just one leg and people do not follow through on their appropriate duties [*svadharma*]. ... Negative planetary influences are very common; *nāga dōṣam* is just one sign of this. *Nāga dōṣam* is the chief illness of the *kaliyugam* and people bring it on themselves with their selfishness and insincerity (Interview, July 19, 2011, Chennai, India).⁴

² The research that I conducted on snake worship traditions and *nāga dōṣam* between 2005 and 2008 was supported by an American Institute of Indian Studies Junior Fellowship and research grants from Emory University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and Fund for International Graduate Research. Ethnographic research carried out in South India in 2011 was funded by an Elon University Faculty Research and Development Award as well as a Hultquist Stipend.

³ Visveshwaran, who typically speaks with me in Tamil, used the English words "modern" and "commercial" here.

⁴ All names used in this article are pseudonyms and translations of interviews from Tamil to English are my own.

Here Visveshwaran counts *nāga dōṣam*, or “snake blemish,” as one among the negative planetary influences that predominate in the *kaliyugam* (the Kali Yuga), the final and most degraded among the four Hindu world ages.⁵ This astrological flaw is believed to be produced when the shadow planets (*chāyā graha*) Rāhu and Ketu (Ta. *Kētu*) – which are, respectively, the north and south lunar nodes, where the moon’s and the sun’s paths cross in the sky – occupy inauspicious positions in an individual’s horoscope (*jātakam*). While *nāga dōṣam* is commonly understood to result from having killed or harmed a snake in this or a previous life, Visveshwaran also identifies it as an affliction that is uniquely indexed to these troubling, Kali Yuga times and claims that selfish and insincere people effectively invite on themselves.



Fig 1: Silver images of Rāhu (on the right) and Ketu (on the left) on display at the temple in Kalahasti, Andhra Pradesh. Photo by Amy L. Allocco.

⁵ In almost all conversations my interlocutors used the spoken Tamil form, *kaliyugam* (written as *kaliyukam*) rather than Kali Yuga. Similar variations exist in the Tamil forms of other Sanskrit terms, such as *dharma* and *dharmam*. Except in translations of direct speech, where I have reproduced my interlocutor’s usages, in this article I have opted to render these term in their Sanskritic and most recognizable forms as “Kali Yuga” and “*dharma*.” Transliterations of Tamil words follow the Tamil Lexicon style.

Visveshwaran is far from alone in his characterizations of *nāga dōṣam*: over the course of my fieldwork I discovered that many devotees, astrologers, priests, and other ritual specialists intimately associate this horoscopic condition **both with the changes instantiated by “modern times”** (by which they mean the present and the quite recent past) and the difficulties of the Kali Yuga. In this article I focus on the themes that emerged across their narratives with an eye toward determining what the intersections between the parallel discourses of *nāga dōṣam* and the Kali Yuga can tell us about how these concepts are being invoked and refashioned as individuals attempt to negotiate the challenges posed by their contemporary situations. I describe the shifts in religious observance, values, and social roles that my informants associated most often with **“these days,” a heuristic category for the present that was marked as inferior to the way things are believed to have been in “those days.”** I contend that rather than reducing such juxtapositions to expressions of nostalgia, we should understand these binaristic indigenous formulations about the differences between the religious and social practices of past times and those that characterize **“modern,”** Kali Yuga times as creative appropriations of the four-fold *yuga* cycle. Even more broadly, **I argue that the Kali Yuga and “modern times”** serve as key indigenous frameworks for contextualizing, confronting, and responding to challenging contemporary realities. More specifically, I highlight the ways in which three strands in the causal web these informants identify – namely declining religious practice, shifting gender expectations, and ecological destruction – are represented in these narratives. Perceived changes in degrees of ritual observance and in **women’s roles as well as** changing relationships with the natural world in urbanizing, globalizing India are understood both as partially responsible for the recent rise in *nāga dōṣam* and as uniquely characteristic of the Kali Yuga, suggesting that these cosmological and astrological models work in tandem as indigenous idioms for categorizing and accounting for the anxiety-producing situations and disconcerting realities that increasingly confront people in these modern times.

Intersecting Idioms: Nāga Dōṣam and the Age of Kali

Nāga dōṣam is widely believed to be increasing in prevalence in contemporary South India, a perception which is usually cast in terms of the difficulties of **“modern times” and/or** the Kali Yuga, when planets are understood as especially unfavorable. Speaking in English, a Brahmin man named Raghavan **said succinctly, “Nowadays, *nāga dōṣam* has become excessive. The main reason is the Kali Yuga”** (Interview, August 15, 2006, Chennai, India). *Nāga dōṣam* is typically diagnosed by an astrologer after

an individual suffers some of **the malignant condition's** negative outcomes, especially delayed marriage and infertility. There is evidence that at least some of the anxiety that I encountered about later marriage ages and fertility is warranted. Certainly, as more women pursue advanced degrees and careers, they are marrying at relatively later ages than they did just a few decades ago. The trend toward later marriage was amply illustrated by the advancing marriage ages supplied by the more than 100 women whom I interviewed on this topic. When I asked them to disclose their own marriage ages and those of their mothers and/or daughters, a significant increase in age at marriage among members of the current generation was evident. During the course of my research I also heard a great deal about escalating wedding costs and rising dowry expectations, which led me to believe that financial factors may also be playing a role in delaying **marriages, since brides' families are** sometimes forced to postpone weddings until they can assemble the requisite funds. In terms of fertility, data released in 2008 by the International Institute for Population Sciences reveals that Tamil Nadu is tied with two other states **for the nation's lowest** Total Fertility Rate (TFR) at 1.8 children per woman, far beneath **India's** average of 2.7 children per woman and well below the replacement level of fertility (*National Family Health Survey, India, 2005-06: Tamil Nadu: 4*). In social and religious contexts where offspring are considered crucial, advancing marriage ages combined with factors as disparate as changing diets and higher incidences of obesity and diabetes have produced serious and justifiable concern about fertility.

The data outlined here are not, however, the ones that are typically offered by my consultants in South India. Instead, late marriage, difficulty in conceiving, and infertility are indigenously understood **as "modern"** afflictions attributable to sins committed against snakes, either by oneself **or one's ancestor, that then manifest in one's horoscope as *nāga dōṣam***. Given **the affliction's** close association with marriage and reproduction, it is perhaps not surprising that my research shows that a disproportionate number of ***nāga dōṣam*** sufferers are women. Delayed marriage and infertility disrupt the traditional social order, gender roles, and expectations about the individual life cycle, and – because of the ancient association between ***nāgas*** and fertility – these problems are understood as ones that the snake goddess (***nāgāttammaṅ***) is particularly well-poised to rectify.

Once diagnosed, this affliction is treated with a wide range of remedial rituals, or ***parikārams***. Individuals may begin with relatively simple and inexpensive ritual therapies, like **worshipping one of the snake goddess's** multiforms or making milk offerings at an anthill, wherein divine snakes are

believed to reside. Those who are initially unsuccessful in their bids to ameliorate *dōṣam*'s negative effects may progress to more elaborate and costly ritual interventions, such as retaining a priest to install a stone snake sculpture and establish divine life in it (*nāga pratiṣṭhā*), gifting a silver or gold *nāga* image to a Brahmin priest, and/or making a pilgrimage to one of the regionally important temples associated with this astrological defect.



Fig 2: At this open-air shrine the Goddess is represented anthropomorphically and in her anthill form, as well as by the decorated trident to the right. A row of stone snake sculptures borders the anthill, wherein the snake goddess is believed to live in her form as a divine reptile. Turmeric and vermillion powders as well as flower garlands indicate devotional activity, as does the oil lamp that has been placed on the ground at the left.

Photo by Amy L. Allocco.

While the difficulties linked with the Kali Yuga and modern times are often hard to disentangle, they include a range of developments that are perceived as negative, including declining religious devotion and ritual observance; deforestation and environmental degradation; and disrespectful behavior in temples, before deities, or **directed towards one's** elders. It is not only worshipers who are represented as less religious: priests and ritual specialists are indicted for being avaricious and for trying to “fleece” devotees. Trends associated with capitalist modernity, such as

consumerism, materialism, and commercialism, are also critiqued, as are urbanization, migration away from ancestral homes, and the break-up of the joint family. These contemporary realities are framed in terms of new economic opportunity and the attendant culture of aspiration that has developed, where people seem caught in a cycle of ever-escalating desire for commodities and amenities. Some shifts – like changing roles for women, who increasingly pursue higher education, undertake jobs outside the home, and participate in public life beyond the family sphere – are clearly marked as gendered and are often accompanied by critiques of alleged immodest behavior and carelessness about purity and menstrual taboos.

Beginning with preliminary research in Tamil Nadu in 2004 and 2005 and over the course of fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork spanning 2006 and 2007, I was able to correlate the growing visibility and popularity of *nāga* traditions with mounting concerns about *dōṣam* and its manifestations in what are described as the modern problems of late marriage and infertility. My research demonstrates that *nāga dōṣam* has emerged as a key strand in the contemporary conversation around Hindu ritual practice, especially as pertains to women, in present-day Tamil Nadu: it features in a wide variety of vernacular sources, including Tamil-language ritual booklets, devotional magazines, and temple pamphlets, and new media, such as astrology television shows and call-in radio broadcasts. As is the case with goddess worship more broadly in Hindu traditions, I found that it is primarily women who are worshipping snake goddesses and engaged in rites aimed at relieving *nāga dōṣam*. Here they are motivated, at least in part, by the continuing high value placed on marriage and children in their familial, religious, and social contexts, and by the fact that the window of opportunity between a respectable marriage age and the **dreaded “late marriage” is often disconcertingly small.** Although a number of my informants drew connections between *nāga dōṣam* and the Kali Yuga in the narratives I recorded during these earlier research periods, it was not until I conducted focused follow-up fieldwork in the summers of 2008 and 2011 that I was able to systematically investigate the specific ways in which the present world age – an important cosmological category with a particular classical pedigree – shows up in discourses surrounding this astrological affliction.

Contextualizing the Kali Yuga

Among the complex cosmic cycles laid out in Hindu traditions, Luis González-Reimann suggests that the *yugās* have emerged as particularly

relevant "with respect to social circumstances and everyday life" (2009: 421). The four world ages devolve from the Kṛta Yuga, the first and perfect age (also known as the Satya Yuga, or Age of Truth), to the Kali Yuga, the final, most degraded, and present epoch, which is often called "the dark age" or "the age of discord."⁶ The Sanskrit *purāṇas* portray this most degenerate age as a time when human behavior diverges quite alarmingly from the codes of *dharma* (duty, right conduct, or virtue); the *Kūrma Purāṇa*, for example, states that as the *yugās* progress virtue will wane among the earth's greedy and selfish inhabitants until, by the Kali Yuga, it is "lost altogether" (Dimmitt and van Buitenen 1978: 40). Indeed, Randy Kloetzli and Alf Hildebeitel characterize the descriptions of the *yugās* in ancient Hindu texts as "a self-evident tale of decline and imminent toppling" and note that the *yugās* also connect lived time with divine time (2004: 568).

In addition to the decline in ritual practice and loss of religious knowledge that characterize the Kali Yuga, environmental destruction and alienation from the natural world also feature prominently in *purāṇic* descriptions.⁷ These narrations foretell a housing shortage, a shrinking number of trees, and a diminished food supply, and conjure an earth that will in turn be whipped by harsh winds, scorched by intense heat, frozen by extreme cold, lashed by torrential rain, and parched from lack of water. The *Kūrma Purāṇa* asserts that "in the Kali there is fatal disease, continuous hunger and fear, awful dread of drought and revolution in the lands" (Dimmitt and van Buitenen 1978: 40), while the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* promises that "the destruction of the world will occur" and "humankind will be utterly destroyed" (Dimmitt and van Buitenen 1978: 41). In these textual sources such ominous developments and severe conditions are directly attributed to human avarice and decadence, effectively correlating moral decay and environmental devastation.

The deterioration associated with the *yuga* cycle was underscored by a range of individuals I encountered during my fieldwork, who voiced displeasure about many of the same issues raised by the classical texts as well as with shifting gender expectations, particularly new roles and freedoms for women. By and large the informants who articulated these

⁶ Some of this material is featured in my recently published book chapter which discusses the possibilities for Hindu animal ethics in terms of discourses about the Kali Yuga and *nāga dōṣam* (Allocco 2014).

⁷ For translations of passages concerning the *yugās* from particular *purāṇas* see, for example, Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitenen (1978: 36-44) and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (1988: 65-73).

concerns **were male urbanites, living in Tamil Nadu's capital city of Chennai,** and several were priests, astrologers, or scholars who had either formal **training in or some acquaintance with Hinduism's Sanskrit** textual traditions. Given that many of their livelihoods depend on the income generated by **clients' ritual undertakings,** it is perhaps unsurprising that a perceived decline in religious practice and a departure from *dharma* would feature so prominently in the narratives I recorded from such individuals. The perspective shared by Nagendran, **one of the priests at the Rāhu temple in Thirunageshwaram** serves as a good example because it identifies in specific terms some of the changes in domestic religious traditions and temple worship that he has observed. Here Nagendran draws a stark contrast between earlier and contemporary times, the latter of which he identifies with the Kali Yuga, and expresses discomfort with the ebb in *dharmic* conduct in contemporary times.

We are more poisonous than the snakes who curse us with *nāga dōṣam* – **do you know that? ... [In the earlier era]** they simply performed their *dharmam*: **a Śaivite** would get up in the morning, take a ritual bath, mark his head with sacred ash, study the texts, and visit temples. ... **He would** only eat after worshiping and offering food to crows. It used to be that way. But due to the worldly attachment and self-centeredness that predominates in the Kali Yuga, there are many changes in our traditions. Why do we go to the temple nowadays? It is because the doctor says we must take a walk every day, so we simply make a round at the temple.⁸ ... Now from sunrise to sunset we work like machines, commit sins [*pāvam*], and do not fulfill our *dharmam* (Interview, October 17, 2006, Thirunageshwaram, India).

This excerpt from my conversation with Nagendran synthesizes several of the critiques of contemporary times that I encountered and is representative of the literate, male, and often high-caste informants who linked the Kali Yuga and *nāga dōṣam*. But others among my interlocutors, both men and women, lived outside the city in towns and villages and had neither direct knowledge of elite, classical textual discussions nor a vested interest in religious practice. While they were more likely to mention social changes, such as shifting gender roles, residential patterns, and family structures, rather than declining interest in Hindu ritual procedures, they also correlated the ills of the present day with the Kali Yuga and juxtaposed the present with a prior era that they saw as incontrovertibly better. A woman in her forties named Priya, whom I met during a temple festival in

⁸ Underlined words or phrases indicate that they were spoken in English in the context of an interview otherwise conducted in Tamil.

Allocco/The Blemish of “Modern Times”

2008, declared that residents of her lower-class, urban neighborhood are not friendly and helpful to one another in the ways that people used to be. When I asked her why she thought this was the case, she explained that people today are insincere, stingy, and jealous of one another. According to Priya this was not always so: she said that even a generation ago people were generous toward and respectful of one another and neighborhood residents could be counted on to contribute funds to their local temple and to participate in its festival celebrations. She concluded our conversation by saying, “This is the *kaliyugam*, isn’t it?” (Interview, July 20, 2008, Chennai, India).

Signs of the Times: Intensifying Dōṣam and Declining Dharma

My informants raised concerns about urbanization, deforestation, and migration away from ancestral homes and lands, trends which they viewed as indicative of the wretchedness of the present age and linked to the prevalence of *nāga dōṣam*. Most common were narratives faulting encroaching human settlements for displacing snakes from their natural habitats, preventing them from mating, destroying their nests, and often resulting in their deaths, all catalysts for *nāga dōṣam*. Nagendran, the priest quoted above, indicated that he understands the growing disregard for sacred knowledge in the Kali Age as part and parcel with environmental degradation.⁹ Sitting in the temple courtyard beneath a sacred tree, he said:

From the simplest life form to more advanced creatures, including plants and trees, every being has feelings. Simply because a tree cannot talk you cannot just cut it down – you will get the curse [*cāpam*]. If you kill [snakes] or commit some other sin, in some way that curse will fall on you. But if we say this in the Kali Yuga no one listens. Our holy texts [*śāstras*] have been saying this for so many years, but now [in the Kali Yuga] is not the time for *dharma* to be followed (Interview, October 17, 2006, Thirunageshwaram, India).

⁹ Drawing on the work of several scholars, Eliza F. Kent discusses how sacred grove restoration projects in Tamil Nadu may tie into contemporary reappraisals of indigenous traditions promoting ecological sustainability as well as broader narratives critiquing Indian modernity (2013: 160-161).



Fig 3: Stone snake sculptures underneath a sacred tree in the courtyard of the temple dedicated to Rāhu in Thirunageshwaram, Tamil Nadu. Photo by Amy L. Allocco.

Scholars working in other contexts have also noted instances where the Kali Yuga was invoked in connection with the less-than-ideal conditions of contemporary life; although *nāga dōṣam* does not surface in their work, these **scholars' findings corroborate** the concerns about environmental degradation, changing gender roles, the care of the elderly, and waning ritual observance that I heard expressed in South India. Ann Grodzins Gold reports on perceptions about environmental and social change from the opposite corner of the subcontinent, where Rajasthani villagers linked deforestation and decreasing rainfall with a decline in *dharma* and morality (1988). Many of her interlocutors associated the Kali Yuga with alterations in human character, relationships, and interactions with the natural environment and viewed agricultural advancements not as improvements or

an indication of “progress,” but rather as something of a loss. Gold notes that the narratives she elicited resonate with textual depictions of the Kali Yuga from the Sanskrit *purāṇas* in that changes in the environment, religious conduct, caste relations, sexual morality, agricultural practices, and human character were intimately related (1988: 182). Indeed, Gold observes that in both the texts and in her field interviews “ecological breakdown and moral laxness have a thoroughly interpenetrating logic” (1988:168). A. Whitney Sanford confirms the mutual imbrication of agriculture, the environment, and human conduct when she writes – in the context of a discussion about serpents and fertility – that the causal connection between *dharma* and agricultural prosperity is an “enduring idiom” in India (2012: 66). Vasudha Narayanan also explores correlations between the decline of *dharma* in the Dark Age and the ravaging of the earth through an examination of issues including overpopulation, consumption, and gender hierarchies (1997), and Kelly D. Alley points out places where Banarsi priests, activists, and devotees leaned on understandings of the Kali Yuga to explain the polluted state of the Ganges River and the degeneracy of the present day (1988). Finally, Borayin Larios reports that Brahmins he encountered during his fieldwork in Maharashtra articulated anxiety about the alleged disappearance of traditional brahminical values and lifestyles and, in particular, their assessment that upper-class urbanites from this community are not preserving particular rituals and recitations (2013: 296 and 301 n17).

In the eyes of my informants in South India sinful conduct like the killing snakes and the cutting down of trees described above by Nagendran fit into a larger complex of human selfishness and disregard for appropriate interpersonal relationships and relations with the natural world that are understood as uniquely indexed to the Kali Yuga and, by extension, to the recent rise in cases of *nāga dōṣam*. These discussions were often framed in terms of escalating sinful behavior (*pāvam*) as well as with reference to **people’s desire to avail themselves of** speedy, painless solutions for the suffering induced by their karmic flaws. Somasundaram, a priest at the well-known Kalahasti temple in Andhra Pradesh, articulated several of these **ideas in our conversation and linked these shameful “modern” behaviors to** the growing interest in *dōṣam*-removal *pūjās*. Like others with whom I spoke, Somasundaram associated the spike in sinful conduct with the Kali Yuga, which is one indigenous category for classifying changes perceived as negative or threatening, and the precarious nature of modern social life:

When we started these *pūjās* the number of people who came was smaller. **It developed gradually and today many people are coming. ...**

People are sinning more and more. For remedies they come here. This sin increases in every *yuga*, and in the Kali Yuga people want quick service. They want an immediate remedy for their suffering and Kalahasti has provided this service (Interview, November 1, 2006, Kalahasti, India).

Sundaraman Gurukkal, a priest serving at Keezhapperumpallam's Ketu temple, Aruḷmiku Nākanātar Cāmi Tirukkōyil, also criticized the expedient methods preferred by his ritual clients and decisively linked their self-serving dispositions to the present world age: "This is the *kali yugam*. ... In these times people only think of shortcut methods. They don't follow the ritual procedures exactly. They selfishly think only of their own problems and how to solve them, saying, 'I should get this post' and 'I should get this job.' Nobody cares about others" (Interview, October 17, 2006, Keezhapperumpallam, India). Sundaraman Gurukkal's charges were echoed by others with whom I spoke, including a learned astrologer and scholar who said, in English, "The tendency of the people has changed – that is why we call it the Kali Yuga. Before the Kali Yuga people were very virtuous; they were very pious and were very good people. They did not cheat people" (Interview, February 27, 2007, Chennai, India).

Similar tropes feature in the narratives that Sarah Lamb recorded about modernity and aging in Bengal, some of which were cast in relation to the four *yugās*. She writes, "In addition to stories about the worsening of family ties and the mistreatment of old people, I constantly heard tales of regret about other deteriorations: mangoes are not as large and sweet, cow's milk doesn't flow as abundantly, trees do not provide as much shade. Villagers do not share the same fellow feeling, people are no longer trustworthy and honest" (2000: 94). Lamb translates singer and scroll artist Ranjit Chitrakar's song, "Modern Society" ("Ādhunik Samāj"): in it the people of the Kali Yuga are sketched as selfish and shallow, caring more about trips to the cinema than social propriety, and special criticism is reserved for immodest new brides, widows who desire to remarry, and those who behave disrespectfully towards the aged (2000: 96-99). Old age homes come in for special criticism in Lamb's most recent book, where she recounts fieldwork narratives blaming Westernization and the Kali Yuga in nearly equal measure for the rise of these institutions (2009: 30 and 69-70).

In addition to voicing disapproval of a host of perceived social changes, such as disregard for the counsel of elders, the breakdown of the joint family system, and changes in women's roles, many of my informants singled out young women for failing to adhere to purity codes. In particular,

a number of men were quick to fault **today's young women for not** observing menstrual taboos. While it is true that jobs, family responsibilities, the design of their dwellings, and other contingencies have made it difficult or even impossible for women to **"keep separate"** (*taṇi*) or maintain **"distance"** (*tūram*) from others during their menstrual periods and that some women simply elect not to observe such customs, several of my male consultants averred that **today's** women have thoughtlessly abandoned these traditional practices and thus invited *nāga dōṣam*.¹⁰ In particular, these informants charged women with being careless about where they dry their menstrual cloths (*tittu tuṇi*) and dispose of their menstrual pads and said that snakes (and sometimes other reptiles, like lizards) may be polluted either by coming into contact with or smelling these items and then curse the offending female. Ramu, a non-Brahmin ritual specialist who serves part-time at a neighborhood temple and presides over consultations with all manner of possessing spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, in his role as a ritual drummer (*pampai-utukkaikkārar*), was one among those who made such claims. He noted that although a woman who behaves carelessly might be the initial cause and locus of *dōṣam*, its malignant effects can percolate out to her entire family. According to Ramu:

When she gets her menses **she doesn't take proper care. She doesn't** care about bathing and putting the cloth properly. When the lizard smells the polluted menstrual cloth bad things will happen; she will get [*nāga*] *dōṣam* and the whole family will have a bad time horoscopically. ... **Her mistake** [*tappu*] will also affect others (Interview, August 1, 2005, Chennai, India).¹¹

While in my field context non-Brahmin men were most likely to detail the **risks entailed by women's fuller participation in the world outside the home** and to link changing gender norms with modern, Kali Yuga times, Lamb reports that older Bengali women were the main tellers of stories concerning the changing roles of current-day daughters-in-law, whom they described as better educated and more likely to have jobs, interested in makeup and movies, and desirous of personal independence (2000: 92). **Lamb's informants** represented the current generation of women as less

¹⁰ See Haripriya Narasimhan (2011) for a discussion of how changing marriage practices, **women's access to education, and migration to urban centers have inspired shifts in** attitudes about and practices related to menstrual pollution among members of the Vattima, a Tamil Brahmin sub-caste.

¹¹ Also see Narasimhan, where she reports that some of her informants characterized **menstruation itself as a "dosham," which she translates as "sin," that can be "bad for the family"** (2011: 254).

modest and less willing to serve their in-laws and implicated them in the ruin of the joint family (2000: 92). Their perspectives resonate with Susan Wadley's findings from the North Indian village of Karimpur, where education, new household authority patterns, and freedom of movement for young women were also linked with the negative changes of modern times (1994: 234). **Madhu Kishwar's interviews with women about their perceptions of Sita's** conduct and treatment in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* signal an awareness that, in the face the exigencies of our current degenerate world age, adaptation may be necessary. While some of them identified Sita as the paragon of ideal wifedom, they expressed uncertainty about whether they could live up to her standard precisely because they live in Kali Yuga times (1997: 22). Instead, **Kishwar's informants** averred that in light of the vicissitudes of the Kali Yuga they **would not be able to fully emulate Sita's** embodiment of wifely virtue, and so expectations for their conduct would require some adjustment. Their claims resonate with several that I will introduce in the final section of this article, which either indicate an openness to amended practices in view of present-day circumstances or evidence innovative responses already underway.

Confronting Inauspicious Planetary Alignments

Many of the ritual specialists with whom I spoke tended to fault the inauspicious planetary alignments that are believed to be characteristic of the Kali Yuga for the rise in cases of *nāga dōṣam*. Somasundaram, one of **the priests quoted above, associates Kalahasti's growing popularity as a** powerful site for mitigating snake blemish with the contemporary prevalence of sinful and selfish behavior and told me that this temple began offering daily, continuous remedial rites for *nāga dōṣam* (*dōṣa nivartti pūjā*) **in response to the "bad planets" that were ruling people's horoscopes.** Where *dōṣam*-removal rituals used to be performed only once weekly at the Kalahasti temple, demand has escalated to the point that temple officials started making these ceremonies available throughout the week and multiple times per day. **I was told by the temple's Executive Officer in 2011** that they sell a daily average of 2,000 tickets for these rites, whose tiered price structure (at 300, 750 and 1,500 rupees) reflects increasing degrees **of individualized ritual attention and proximity to the temple's inner sanctum** (Interview, July 27, 2011, Kalahasti India). Somasundaram cast the exponential growth in **Kalahasti's** renown as a place for ameliorating *dōṣam* in terms of the fact that the holy site is impervious to the unfavorable "gaze" of the planets. As a result of its invulnerable, sacred status, he asserted that Kalahasti is an especially effective refuge for those seeking to counteract negative astrological influences in Kali Yuga times, when the planets are recognized as particularly malefic. A priest named

Shivanathan added an additional dimension to the “bad planets” thesis by suggesting that in earlier times *nāga dōṣam* may have gone undetected among those who did not have the custom of consulting horoscopes in the course of arranging their children’s marriages. He asserted: “*Nāga dōṣam* is excessive now. Part of the reason is that more castes look at horoscopes these days than they did before. But the other reason is the Kali Yuga – the planets are bad and there is more sin” (Interview, August 14, 2006, Chennai, India). Shivanathan went on to explain that in undiagnosed cases girls might simply remain unmarried and that girls who somehow managed to marry might be unable to conceive, and then possibly be abandoned by their husbands, sent back to their natal homes, or find themselves prematurely widowed as a result of their untreated *nāga dōṣam*.



A painting of Ketu in a hybrid, anthropomorphic-theriomorphic, form on a wall at the Kalahasti temple in Andhra Pradesh. This image is accompanied by a menu of remedial rituals (*parikārams*), along with their respective prices, that are on offer to counter *dōṣam*. Photo by Amy L. Allocco.

Sundaraman, one of the priests serving at Keezhapperumpallam’s Ketu temple, noted that faithful worship of one’s family deity (*kulateyvam*) is an effective way to diminish the influence of negative planetary forces.

According to him, “The family deity must be worshiped at least once annually, usually during the period of our birth star. This is compulsory” (Interview, October 17, 2006, Keezhapperumpallam, India). However, because in recent times families have moved away from their ancestral **homes and native towns and villages, where their guardian deity’s temple is** typically located, Sundaraman said that it is increasingly common for them to neglect these ritual obligations. His analysis resonates with broader concerns I heard expressed about migration and urbanization, many of which had a gendered critique embedded in them. These critiques represented modern wives, particularly daughters-in-law, as unenthusiastic **about their ritual responsibilities to their affinal families’ deities.** According to this line of reasoning, the failure to propitiate **one’s** family deity even once annually left individuals open to planetary afflictions like *nāga dōṣam* that *kulatyevam* worship could have easily eliminated.

Informants who did not come from priestly backgrounds also connected the inauspicious planetary alignments and the ever-expanding greed and desire of the Kali Age to the uptick in worship at particular sites associated with *nāga dōṣam*. In his comments (shared in English), a bank executive named Raghavan referenced **the temple dedicated to Rāhu** at Thirunageshwaram in order to illustrate how acute the concern about *nāga dōṣam* has become **and to highlight people’s burgeoning desires for wealth and consumer goods.** He said, “The planets are bad in the Kali Yuga, so people suffer. At the same time, they have so many wishes they want fulfilled. ... This kind of worship [to remove *dōṣam*] was not famous years ago when I was doing my schooling in Thirunageshwaram. We used to go to that temple and play cricket inside the compound. There were no visitors; nothing. Six months ago I went there and it was so crowded I could not even enter into the temple” (Interview, August 15, 2006, Chennai, India). The priest Nagendran, who serves at this temple, agreed that the worship of Rāhu has increased dramatically in recent years as this planet has gained notoriety as the chief *dōṣam*-causing entity. He correlated the rise in cases of *nāga dōṣam* with the decline of *dharma* in the Kali Yuga and asserted that his temple was benefiting from the surge in people seeking ritual treatments for delayed marriage and infertility. In Nagendran’s words:

Nowadays we go in search of hospitals – the world is full of hospitals. ... **It’s only in our generation that hospitals thrive everywhere.** Where there were no hospitals before, now there are even 24-hour hospitals! ... **So, too, temples have proliferated.** People go to hospitals to cure their diseases and to temples to remove their suffering. In the *kaliyugam* they visit Thirunageshwaram in huge numbers because

they suffer from *nāga dōṣam*. My temple prospers but truly, everything is upside down now (Interview, October 17, 2006, Thirunageshwaram, India).

Innovation and the Demands of the Kali Yuga

As a heuristic place-holder for an age of dharmic decay, unrelenting self-interest, inattentiveness to ritual obligations, and declining conformity to traditional gender roles, the Kali Yuga does not appear to have much to **recommend it. However, although things may truly be “upside down” in the current world age, there are signals that this state of affairs may also open up new social possibilities as well as potential space for ritual innovation. Indeed, the disordered present epoch serves as a justification both for new forms of *nāga dōṣam* diagnosis as well as seemingly novel ritual therapies to treat its manifestations. Although the legitimacy of these relatively subjective “presumptive” diagnoses is debated by astrologers, they are increasingly employed in cases where the planetary configurations in an individual’s horoscope do not clearly signal *nāga dōṣam* but the person nevertheless seems to be suffering from the condition’s ill effects. These new presumptive diagnoses are predicated on the assumption that the individual has “subtle” (*sūkṣma*) *dōṣam* in his/her current birth and that this astrological malady will more fully manifest in his/her next lifetime and be clearly evident in that lifetime’s horoscope.** Particularly salient for our purposes is the fact that a substantial number of ritual specialists with whom I spoke argued that these new diagnostic forms are permissible in these challenging Kali Yuga times, when so many experience the modern problems of late marriage and infertility.

The Dark Age is also invoked as a rationalization for incorporating a variety of new or recontextualized remedial rites, such as brahminical domestic fire sacrifices (*hōmam*) and decidedly non-brahminical expulsion and exorcism rites (*kalippu*), into *nāga dōṣam*’s ritual repertoire. These innovations are described as uniquely appropriate to – and even mandated by – the perplexities of the Kali Yuga and the vicissitudes of modern times, thus demonstrating that the fourth cosmic age is invoked and deployed in a range of ways to address, interpret, and respond to changing contexts.

González-Reimann’s observation that the Kali Yuga’s “negative characteristics explain the difficult world we live in” (2009: 421) is borne out by the way this cosmic era was described by many of my informants in South India, who referenced the current world age alongside *nāga dōṣam* in their narratives as they attempted to classify changes perceived as

negative or threatening. As explanatory models for a range of distressing present-day realities, the Kali Yuga and *nāga dōṣam* serve as parallel and sometimes intersecting idioms for expressing and reacting to the precarious nature of modern social life. These indigenously meaningful interpretive frameworks enable individuals to classify and respond to certain types of **“modern” misfortunes, such as late marriage and infertility, and negotiate** the challenging terrain of shifting gender expectations and deteriorating relationships with the natural world that are perceived both as causes of *nāga dōṣam* and as signifiers of these Kali Yuga times.

In her study of India’s sacred trees Albertina Nugteren points out that the Kali Yuga has become **“a metaphor, a manner of speech, a common denominator for bad times”** and cautions that this designation may lend itself to a **“defeatist attitude”** (2005: 379), a **“fatalist indifference,”** and a **“license for inconsiderate behavior”** (2005: 381). As a counterpoint to these possibilities, I will conclude with a perspective shared by Raghavan, the bank executive quoted above, who belongs to a family of committed snake goddess devotees and who has two daughters. Speaking to me in English, he ascribed the advancing average marriage age of women in recent decades to the Kali Yuga, before going on to say:

But if you see the social side of it, even those children would not like to marry early. They want it to be later. So this [later marriage] is a positive outcome of *nāga dōṣam* and the Kali Yuga. Earlier they were married out of compulsion. **But I won’t compel my girls.** I will not interfere; I will let them study to their highest capabilities. That freedom was not available earlier, especially to the girl child. ... But **today women’s empowerment is coming more.** In India there are these self-help groups, and empowerment schemes. My bank has **women’s discussion groups and microfinance loans, and they have** instituted a savings scheme for women, all towards social transformation. We are effecting social transformation through finance and economic empowerment and men are now afraid of these things because they challenge the status quo. In time women will become empowered – they are capable, they have potential. If this is the Kali Yuga, **with late marriage and women’s empowerment, so be it!** (Interview, August 15, 2006, Chennai, India).

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The Age of Śani in Modern Delhi

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Abstract

In northern India, the planetary deity Śani has historically been regarded as lord of many inauspicious phenomena that are also associated with the Kali Yuga. In the realm of astrology, the inevitable period of Śani's malevolent influence is known as *sāṛhe sātī*, and ritual specialists, particularly those of the *dakaut* caste, have historically been called upon to mediate between Śani and those afflicted by him. However, contemporary Śani-related practices in Delhi suggest that he is no longer simply conceptualized as a malevolent, inauspicious deity. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted at several Śani temples in Delhi, this article documents some of the ways in which contemporary worship of Śani is shaped by – and a sensible response to – changes in the Indian economy brought about by its ongoing liberalization. In this new world, even the Kali Yuga takes on unprecedented, surprising meanings.

Key Words: Śani, astrology, Delhi, dakaut, liberalization, middle class, Kali Yuga

The Kali Yuga and Śani

Indian religions offer many ways to explain financial, physical, or social problems. Of these, the concept of *karma* is widespread, as is the notion of the *yugas*, or cosmic ages. While formulations of the *yugas* vary regionally, in the greater Hindu tradition the passage of cosmic time is marked by a decline in morality, with the final age – the Kali Yuga – being the most degenerate of all.¹ In contemporary India, it is not uncommon to hear modern Hindus invoke these general principles in order to explain all manner of social and personal problems. However, it is also true that **Hindus'** recourse to the language of *karma* and the Kali Yuga is neither

¹ For a history of the development of the concept of the *yugas*, see Luis Gonzalez-Reimann (2002), wherein he argues that a mature theory of the *yugas* developed after the composition of the epics.

consistently precise nor even religious; in some cases, blaming the Kali Yuga resembles nothing so much as a disgruntled American invoking the maleficent agenda of the Democratic or – **depending on the speaker's** politics – Republican party. In other cases, **Hindus'** references to the Kali Yuga are firmly grounded in local or regional religious beliefs and practices.

While the concepts of *karma* and the four *yugās* are ubiquitous, these somewhat abstract principles generally become relevant to **individuals'** personal struggles only when considered within the framework of horoscopes. Each horoscope is unique, but everyone, regardless of time of birth, must eventually contend with what is popularly known as *sāṛhe sātī* – a seven and a half year period of time during which **Śani** – the inauspicious and fearsome Hindu deity associated with the planet Saturn – dominates.² Astrology has deep roots in the Hindu tradition, but predictive astrology based on the seven visible planets (of which Saturn is one) developed in India only after the introduction of the western (Greek) calendar, with the earliest known listing of the planets dating to the fourth century of the Common Era (Knipe 1996: 214). As described in these early Indian sources, **Śani** is not terribly inviting. The fourth-century *Yavanajātaka*, said to be based on a second-century translation of a Greek astrological work, describes **Śani** thus:

He is strong, but his head hangs down and his limbs tremble[?]. He is tall, and has thick, black rough and dreadful hair, and nails and teeth which are discolored and broken. He is mean and very irascible; his actions are evil. Accustomed to hatred, he is a malicious master. In his black garments and looking like añjana (collyrium), thin and **lazy** [**Śanaiścara**] has abandoned joy. His essence is sinew (Knipe 1996:217).³

Śani's inauspicious character is also easily recognizable in Puranic and epic sources: in one popular Puranic story, his powerful, destructive gaze beheads Ganesh, and he is linked with death itself by virtue of his status as a younger half-brother of Yama. He is also associated with a host of destructive and inauspicious events and individuals whose growing influence is, in other sources, commonly coupled with the Kali Yuga. Thus, for example, **Varāhamihira's** sixth century *Bṛhatsaṃhita* notes that, among other things, **Śani's influence will bring** floods, drought, and famine, and he

² Knipe notes that in fact, according to some astrological systems, **Śani** is understood to dominate a horoscope three times. In northern India, the language of *sāṛhe sātī* is most common, and refers to a period of time – **usually in one's early thirties** – when **Śani** will dominate.

³ Here Knipe is quoting from David Pingree's *The Yavanajātaka of Sphujidhvaja*.

is held to be the ruler of all manner of debased or otherwise inauspicious people, among them *śūdras*, cowards, thieves, vow-breakers, and widows (Kern and Shrikrishna 2013: 91-95).

In short, Śani is bad news, and he has long been regarded as lord of many degenerate and inauspicious phenomena that have historically been associated with the Kali Yuga. However, contemporary Śani-related practices in Delhi suggest that he is no longer simply conceptualized as a malevolent planetary deity. In what follows, exploration of **several new Śani temples in Delhi and modern, urban Śani devotees' understandings of Śani** will reveal some of the ways in which contemporary worship of Śani is shaped by – and a sensible response to – changes in the Indian economy brought about by its ongoing liberalization. In this new world, even the Kali Yuga can take on unprecedented, surprising meanings.

The relationship between the liberalization of the Indian economy and changes in religious practice in urban contexts is of ongoing interest to scholars of Hinduism; often their exploration of this topic focuses on **“middle class” segments of the Indian population and the question of the nature of “modernity.”** The concept of “middle class” is not, of course, transparent. **In what follows, I draw upon Daniel Bell’s suggestion that “middle class” need not be understood primarily in terms of income, but rather, as a section of society defined by wants rather than by needs (Bell, 1996: 2).** Like the urban, middle class Hanuman devotees described by Philip Lutgendorf, Śani’s middle class devotees are also identifiable by their pronounced awareness of the precariousness of their position *vis à vis* **“the poor,” (Lutgendorf 1997),** though as we shall see, **Śani’s devotees also exhibit confidence in their ability to flatter, praise, or otherwise ingratiate themselves to Śani such that he becomes their tireless defender.**

Lutgendorf has also suggested that Hanuman’s **liminal status (as an almost-human monkey)** appeals to the middle class because its members themselves feel marginal; he further argues that an association between Hanuman and Tantric power has been created by a middle class in need of **the “quick fix” Tantric practices offer** (Lutgendorf 2001: 288). While Śani’s status as an outsider may contribute to his middle-class appeal, his power is not articulated in terms **of the “quick fix” offered by** Tantric ability so much as that offered by the newly imagined, popular, and particularly middle-class view of Hindu astrology as a rational science that can and should be mobilized for personal gain. At the same time, as I will discuss in what follows, **Śani veneration also retains and transforms narratives and**

practices that do not easily fit with the “scientific” turn taken by many contemporary proponents of Hindu astrology.

In addition to these new and distinctly modern re-imaginings of Śani’s personality and efficacy, Delhi’s new Śani temples exhibit some of the tendencies noted by Joanne Waghorne in her study of modernity and Hindu sacred spaces: they are influenced by an urban environment dominated by ownership of houses; their leadership is hired rather than hereditary; and their space and polity reflect democratic models of civic organizations. They also share with Hindu right organizations like the Raṣṭriya Svayaṁsevak Saṅgh and the Viśva Hindū Pariṣad a directive to preserve and spread Hinduism (Waghorne 2004: 231) and indeed, some of the new Śani temples in Delhi do enjoy support from the Hindu right.⁴ However, as I will discuss below, Śani’s historic and ongoing relationship with low-caste *ḍakaut*⁵ *pujārīs* connect his new places of worship with earlier conceptualizations of his personality and power even as these connections are contested and transformed in the face of economic liberalization and modernity.

Śani Pujārīs, Old and New

In northwestern India, Śani has typically been placated through the intervention of *pujārīs* who are members of the *ḍakaut* caste. In Delhi, Rajasthan, and Punjab, the official status of *ḍakauts* is OBC (Other Backward Class) – the Indian government’s designation for caste groups historically regarded as “low” – but they self-identify as professional astrologers and Brahmins whose special work involves serving as mediators between Śani and humanity. *Ḍakauts* function as receptacles for Śani’s inauspicious influence, and clients regard the rituals they perform as effective in part because they enable the officiating *ḍakaut pujārī* to transfer Shani’s influence from the client to himself.

⁴ Śani temples are not, however, perfectly aligned with all of Waghorne’s observations about modern temples: the convention that Śani *mūrtis* should be open to the sky is still observed at certain Śani temples, making Śani temples more connected with the natural world than many modern Hindu temples, which Waghorne notes are generally unmoored from notions of the sacrality of nature (Waghorne 2004: 235-236).

⁵ Also pronounced *ḍakot*.



Fig 1: Śani mūrti, *ḍakaut*-administered Śani temple, Paharganj, Delhi. Photo Credit: Carla Bellamy.

Ḍakauts are also astrologers, and their right to practice this profession is clearly articulated in their origin story. Thus, in the process of explaining their professional credentials to me, a Paharganj-based *ḍakaut* couple affiliated with what is may be the oldest Śani temple in Old Delhi moved from a discussion of their unique ability to digest Śani *dān* (offerings made to Śani) to a description of their lineage and the origin of their profession as astrologers.⁶ As the wife explained:

⁶ Aspects of this account of *ḍakaut* origins differ significantly from stories in written sources, according to which *ḍakaut* are descendants of a *śūdra* or other low-caste woman and a Brahmin. For full accounts of these stories, see *People of India: Rajasthan*, K. S.

All the types of Brahmin in the world gathered, and god (*bhagavān*) said that they couldn't digest the offerings made to Śani, but that the *ḍakaut paṇḍits* could digest it [the *dān*], could bear (*bardāsī*) it...and so we're regarded as the best of all [...] and those who can't take it are below us. [attention then turns to a picture on their home altar.] That's lord Viṣṇu, and that's Bhr̥gu-jī. We're his lineage, his descendants (*santān*). [...] What happened was Bhr̥gu kicked Viṣṇu, and Viṣṇu ran away from him and stood at a safe distance. Then Viṣṇu's wife Lakṣmī got really angry, and she said, 'why did you kick my husband?' And then Lakṣmī-jī said 'I'll never come near you again' – meaning *money*, he wasn't ever going to have enough money. But Bhr̥gu said, 'I'll compose such a great work (*racanā*) that you will certainly stay with me forever, and sit at my feet.' And so he did – he made all the [astrology] books (*pattra, pothī*) [...]and we are Bhr̥gu's children, and that's why members of our community work as astrologers. When people come to us, they offer money for our work, and they touch our feet out of gratitude. So Lakṣmī – meaning money – is always with us. Look at the picture – he's [Bhr̥gu] got *money* at his feet.⁷

Beyond his importance to the *ḍakaut* community, the Vedic rishi Bhr̥gu is credited with creating the discipline of astrology, and there are consequently several versions of the above story; in another, for example, the gods eventually destroy all but a few of the astrological charts made by Bhr̥gu and other rishis because their work threatened the omniscience of the gods (Svoboda and Hart 1996:15).

Singh, ed. Popular Prakashan Pvt., Ltd. 1998 pp. 286-291; Punjab District Gazetteers: Ibbetson series, 1883-1884, p. 112.

⁷ This and all translations from the Hindi are my own. In the above translation, I have edited out several interruptions, tangents, and repetitions from the original statement.



Fig 2: *Ḍakaut*-owned portable Śani shrine. Photo Credit: Carla Bellamy.

In addition to serving as *pujārīs* and astrologers, *Ḍakauts* in Delhi make a living by maintaining Śani street shrines. In their most basic form, these shrines consist of a small iron image of Śani presiding over a receptacle filled with mustard oil, an offering known to please him. Passersby drop coins in them, and these offerings quickly sink below the oil, where they are **collected at the end of the day by the shrine's owner**. In Old Delhi, many of these portable Śani shrines are under the jurisdiction of one extended family of *Ḍakauts* – five brothers who say that their family lived in Old Delhi long before Partition changed the geography of the city. Their shrines are

placed in high traffic and/or Hindu majority areas of the old city of Delhi; their location is remarkably consistent. In addition to the portable street shrines, many of the new neighborhood shrines – shrines that have been built to offer residents a convenient Saturday venue for making offerings to Śani – are also operated by *dakauts*, though in keeping with what Waghorne has observed about modern temples, often the *dakaut* is a salaried employee rather than a hereditary owner.

However, some of Delhi's major centers of Śani worship – the biggest temples that have been built in the past few years – are not owned or operated by *dakauts*. One of the most popular of these is a large temple that sits across from the Chandni Chauk Metro station in Old Delhi. The **temple's location near a Metro station** is typical – indeed, many of the new temples are located near Metro stations or in similarly trafficked areas. As a temple trustee explained to me:

One time, **Guruji** asked a *seth* for a donation for the temple's big birthday (anniversary) celebration. The *seth* gave two rupees and made insulting remarks. **Guruji** called upon Śani Māhārāj and said **I'm not going begging** in the bazaar for money! You grant me a boon so powerful that all of Chandni Chauk will come before you with their hands clasped in devotion! And the lord Śanidev heard **Guruji's prayer**. **Soon thereafter, the Delhi Metro project was passed, and one of its stations was built on the temple's** back side, at the very feet of Śanidev. And now, every man, woman, and child passes by this temple with their hands folded together in reverence!

Despite the fact that the central *mūrti* in the temple is a large Śani and Śani is credited with the temple's **lucrative location near the Metro station**, this is not officially a Śani temple, but rather, a Nine Planets temple. However, the temple is only busy on Saturdays, when it attracts throngs of pilgrims offering *thālīs* laden with typical implements of Śani puja, making the temple a *de facto* – if not *de jure* – Śani one. According to its current administrators, the temple itself came into existence in 1962, but it did not become a Nine Planets temple until 1981, when a wealthy donor, suffering during his period of *sāṛhe sātī*, donated the resources necessary to make a Nine Planets temple.



Fig 3: Saturday at the Chandni Chauk Nine Planets temple. Photo Credit: Carla Bellamy.

Interestingly, the Brahmin management at this temple takes a conventional and **historically “accurate”** view that **no one but a *ḍakaut*** can or should consume things that have been offered to Śanidev because no one but a *ḍakaut* can bear Śani’s dangerous, inauspicious influence. In this case, a donor wanted to contribute a Śani *mūrti* to the temple in an effort to mitigate the effect of his *sāṛhe sāṭī*. However, he was initially unable to find a temple willing to accept his donation. As the temple management explained to me:

When the donor – a *seṭh* – tried to donate the Śani *mūrti*, **Guruḷī** refused, **saying “I’m not a *ḍakaut*.”** And **Guruḷī** forbid everyone at the temple from accepting the donation. After a while, the *seṭh* came back and said **Māhārāj**, no one will accept this *mūrti*. Please, please take it. But **Māhārāj** said **“I’m not a *ḍakaut*. But if you commission *mūrtis* for the eight other planets, I’ll take Śani.”** The *seṭh* had to save a lot and get money from here and there, but eventually he had the eight other *mūrtis* made, and then **Guruḷī** accepted them all and had them installed.

Elaborating a bit later in the conversation, a *paṇḍit* at the temple got to the heart of the matter, that is, he addressed the issue of Śani's *prasād*, saying:

With the addition of the other planets, the *prasād* of Śanidev won't cause trouble – there's no fault or harm in that kind of *prasād*. Śanidev Māhārāj belongs to the *ḍakauts*. But when tempered by the eight planets, Śanidev Māhārāj becomes gentle and auspicious (*saumya*, *śubh*).

The geography of this temple, with its massive central image of Śani – not to mention its scene on Saturday – strongly suggests that this fine distinction between Śani *prasād* and Nine Planets *prasād* may be lost on at least some of the thousands who visit on Saturdays; further, the Saturday *prasād* that is offered at this Nine Planets temple is a chick pea-based concoction that looks and tastes exactly like the *prasād* offered at a small *ḍakaut*-administered Śani temple near the Paharganj Metro station.



Fig 4: Śani temple, Paharganj Metro station, Delhi. Photo Credit: Carla Bellamy.

Some people, it seems, have no qualms about taking *Śani prasād*, and many *ḍakauts* presiding over new *Śani* temples have no qualms about handing it out. Indeed, at many of these *ḍakaut*-run temples, and also at shrines to *Śani* not run by *ḍakauts*, I was regularly offered *prasād*, most commonly sweets and fruit that had been offered to *Śani mūrtis* – and in the case of a *Śani mūrti* recently installed in a Daryaganj-based *Vālmiki* temple, a book of prayers and devotional songs to *Śani* that was kept at the feet of the *mūrti* itself. In the case of the *Vālmiki* temple, when I insisted that I couldn't accept the book as a gift, the *pujārī* said with breezy finality, "it's *prasād*," and that settled it. These conflicting perspectives on *Śani prasād* suggest that it is no longer universally held that *Śani* is fundamentally inauspicious, possessed of a destructive, malevolent gaze, and therefore incapable of generating *prasād*.

Old Rituals, New Ideas

Along with conflicting attitudes towards the role of *ḍakauts* as *Śani's* intermediaries and the nature of *Śani prasād*, the ritual life of *Śani* temples – both large ones that are not *ḍakaut*-administered and smaller ones that are – provides further evidence of new attitudes towards *Śani*. The offerings made in temples – *ḍakaut* and non-*ḍakaut* – are a case in point. As with *ḍakaut* street shrines, mustard oil is a common offering made at *Śani* temples; other *Śani*-associated or *Śani*-pleasing offerings include black sesame seeds, iron nails, and black cloth. At some temples, devotees pour mustard oil on the *mūrti* itself; at others, the oil is poured in a dish or other large container placed at the feet of the *mūrti* and subsequently used to fuel small oil lamps. Taking mustard oil offerings to a new level, at *Śani Dhām* (also known as the International Center for *Śani* Consciousness) in far south Delhi, male pilgrims have the opportunity to strip, don a *lurīgī* and offer a full-body anointment in mustard oil to a *Śani mūrti* contained in the one of several on-site temples.



Fig 5: Śani mūrti, Śani Dhām. Photo Credit: Carla Bellamy.

According to temple patrons, mustard oil is offered to Śani not only because he *likes* it, but because he *needs* it. Specifically, they cite versions of popular stories that relate how Hanuman – accidentally, on purpose, or accidentally-on-purpose – beat Śani and then, to add insult to injury, refused Śani the mustard oil he requested to dress his wounds (Lutgendorf 2007: 175-76; 233-234; 140-142; 200; 202). Hence, the mustard oil that

devotees offer to Śani, while conforming to the general paradigm under which *prasād* makes the deity “pleased,” is unusual in that it is offered not so much to please a deity for pleasure’s sake as to support him in his hour of need – pleasing, to be sure, but perhaps also empowering to the giver, since in making the gift, he or she is essentially helping a god get back on his feet.

In addition to being a common offering made to Śani *mūrti*s, mustard oil is also a central substance in the ritual of *chāyā kā dān*, a ritual designed to remove the maleficent effect of Śani and/or other inauspicious planets and influences. In the context of village life in pre-liberalization northwestern India as described by Gloria Goodwin Raheja, this ritual requires the individual to cast his or her reflection in an iron bowl of mustard oil containing a copper coin. This oil, together with other items, is collected by a *dakaut* with the understanding that he is willingly taking the maleficent effects on himself. A variation on this ritual requires that the iron bowl be left at a crossroads, with the understanding that the maleficent influence, transferred to the oil, will attach itself to an unfortunate and unaware passerby. (Goodwin Raheja 1988: 112-113) In both cases, the underlying assumption seems to be that Śani’s influence is fearsome, indestructible, and inevitable, and that the best one can do is to transfer it – *via* mustard oil – to a willing or unwilling host. Śani, in other words, remains true to his roots as a frightening deity best avoided.

Historically, therefore, mustard oil seems to have had two Śani-related functions: it is a substance that is used to absorb, contain and transfer negative influences, and it is a substance offered to please (in this case, heal) the god. In the context of contemporary urban temple worship of Śani these two uses of mustard oil have been conflated: that is, the offering made to soothe Śani’s wounds has become a vehicle to transfer Śani’s maleficent influence back to Śani *himself*. I first became aware of this phenomenon while observing several Śani temples and street shrines maintained by *dakauts*. In both cases, I noticed some templegoers taking care to look into the mustard oil lamps or buckets of mustard oil placed at the feet of Śani *mūrti*s. While in some cases templegoers may assume that *dakauts* will use the oil, the common understanding seems to be that the reflection – *chāyā* – cast in the oil will be absorbed by it, and will therefore be returned to the deity at whose feet the offerings are made. The oil bath offered by visitors to Śani Dhām makes this offering of the *chāyā* to Śani himself explicit – Śani is anointed in oil after the devotee has cast his reflection in an iron pot containing (ideally) eight kilograms of mustard oil.

As of 2010, at Śani Dhām, only men are allowed to perform this ritual; however, pilgrims and management both expressed hope that soon a ladies-only area would be built where women could perform the ritual privately, thus preserving their modesty. Echoing these views, Śani Dhām's official website goes to great lengths to dismiss the belief – enforced, for example, at the Brahmin-operated Chandni Chauk Metro station temple but not at the *ḍakaut*-operated shrine next to the Paharganj Metro station – that women, by virtue of their potential ritual impurity, are not allowed to touch the Śani *mūrtis*. Thus, the English language website of Śani Dhām states:

The principle of embracing the idol of Lord Śani in wet cloths [sic], after **having him bathed by oil i.e. 'Telabhishek', is quite inconvenient** to ladies because doing so they are supposed to wear unstitched clothes and this pooja has to be performed in wet cloths alone. So such performances are supposed to be made by their husbands or the sons. Hence its not that they are kept aside because of impurity but its [sic] due to inconvenience to **be borne by them to maintain the above principles of 'Telabhishek'**.⁸

Asserting that men and women are equal is part of a larger discourse of individualism and egalitarianism prevalent on both the website and at Śani Dhām itself. In relation to the *telābhiṣek*, pilgrims and temple management both emphasize what is undeniably true about the ritual: it is conducted without a human intermediary: only the devotee, the deity and an abundance of mustard oil.

The de-linking of religious practice and caste identity is also discernible in **the language of Sani Dham's management**. Thus, in a conversation with me, one of **the site's senior managers** emphasized that Dātī, Śani Dhām's presiding guru, is absolutely not *ḍakaut* by birth and in fact is not someone for whom a caste identity **is relevant, because he is a sādhu**, and therefore **a "simple man" without caste**. Expanding on this anti-caste sentiment to further develop the individualistic ethos that dominates the site's culture, he emphasized that the temple to Śani is unique in all of India. When I asked **why, he said**, "Do you see any *pujārīs* or *paṇḍits* coming between the people and God?" **"No," I said, because**, in fact, intermediaries were nowhere to be seen. **"It's here,"** he concluded triumphantly, "that people have direct access to the gods. No *paṇḍits*, no *pujārīs*."⁹

⁸ http://shanidham.in/page.php?l_id=46, accessed 10/7/2012.

⁹ This conversation is reproduced from one transcribed in my field notes. I was not permitted to record the actual interview, so the direct speech above is a reconstruction of what was said rather than a verbatim translation.

On the one hand, this fits within the individualistic, anti-caste rhetoric of bhakti religion and indeed, over the course of my research I have encountered many Śani temple patrons who maintain a strong devotional relationship with Śani. On the other hand, it seems as though something new is developing – that is, in keeping with what is conventionally understood to happen in capitalist modernity, worship of Śani at Śani Dhām suggests that urbanites' sense of self has become less enmeshed in relationships with others. *Dakauts'* status as Śani's *pujārī* – and with it, perhaps, certain connections between notions of religiosity and notions of caste – has become less relevant.

Śani and the Kali Yuga Redefined

In the mustard oil-based rituals I have described above, Śani is conceptualized as an inauspicious or dangerous influence, and indeed, in conversations with me, patrons of Śani temples throughout Delhi repeatedly stated that casting a reflection in the mustard oil prompts feelings of "lightness." This language suggests that these Śani devotees conceive of their offering in terms of transferring negativity or inauspiciousness from themselves to another entity *via* the oil. However, at Śani Dhām, offering one's troubles up in the prescribed eight kilograms of mustard oil isn't simply understood in terms of transfer of malevolent influence back to its malevolent source, since Śani Dhām's website explicitly articulates a sentiment I encountered not just at Śani Dhām, but also at smaller Śani temples: emblazoned on Śani Dhām's English language website, a Hindi slogan declares *Śani śatru nahin mitr hai* – Śani: friend, not foe. Thus, Śani is not a deity who should be feared – he is simply the lord of *karma*, an impartial enforcer of an individual's *karma*. As part of this rehabilitation of Śani's image, the popular sense I encountered in conversations with Śani temple patrons – namely, that Śani is a deity worth patronizing because he is fearsome enough to act in this degenerate and corrupt age – has necessarily been recast:

Friends! In our classical books the present age has been described as Kaliyug, commonly it is also called as Kaliyuga. The manner in which, people are dependent on the modern scientific articles and machines these days, the word Kaliyuga (Kal means components) is very appropriate. With the help of latest scientific discoveries and the inventions, man is living a luxurious life day by day. What to talk of the Earth, the Oceans and the Atmosphere, the man has also explored & stepped into the outer space very fast. In Vedic Astrology, the outer space, the barren land, the

graveyards, the forests & the deep deserts, deep valleys, the mountains, the caves, the ditches, the mines and all the inhabitant free places on this earth, do fall under the jurisdiction of the Śani. If we notice the progress in the space and the other related areas, it would be justified calling this age as **'The Saturnian age** i.e. the age of Lord Śani. The jurisdiction of Lord Śani includes not only the deep and secret knowledge but also all our actions relating to the vigilance, the labour, the service, the helplessness, the handicap persons and helping sick and the old people.¹⁰

In the larger context of Śani Dhām, the slightly confusing logic of this passage becomes relatively clear: the Kali Yuga is characterized by technological innovation, and this is not necessarily a terrible thing, since (for those who can afford it, anyway) technology potentially offers a more comfortable lifestyle. However, no matter how far humans progress in space, they will never reach the limits of Śani's domain. **So this "Saturnian Age" in which we now live is one in which the ever-expanding sphere of human influence and knowledge only serves to further expand our understanding of Śani's supremacy.** Further, because Śani is the lord of *karma*, and perfectly just, we must be very careful to perform only good actions, among the best of which are helping the less fortunate.

Striking a note sure to resonate with any Indian citizen, **Śani's incorruptible status is contrasted with the Indian government's essentially corrupt nature:**

There is no scope for any bribery, flattery or the "Right of Might" in the court of Lord Shani. [...]The decisions made by Shani can never never [sic] be challenged like the ones made by the Supreme Court. Even lord Shiva and Vishnu have to approve these decisions. The only petition that gets a hearing are the good-deeds, the prayers, the pilgrimage and the respect paid and service performed to the Guru, mother, father, guests and sages. Such *Karmas* definitely do undo the **punishment for one's misdeeds and he is blessed for his real good-deed** in the present times. This is the only out which we can make our unfavorable situations as favourable, thereby enabling our life to be peaceful and contented.¹¹

Rather than the notion that suffering is inevitable and that Śani's inauspiciousness can be transferred but not eliminated, Śani worship at Śani Dhām is predicated on the notion that everyone can win: misfortune is

¹⁰ http://shanidham.in/page.php?l_id=2 accessed 10/7/2012

¹¹ http://shanidham.in/page.php?l_id=2 accessed 10/7/2012

the result of bad *karma*, but anyone can better his or her situation, particularly through gifts to the poor. In other words, the economy in which Śani operates has changed; whereas it used to be the case that offerings were made to *dakauts* in order to rid oneself of Śani's malevolent influence, now offerings are made to Śani himself under the auspices of bhakti, and the way to escape the consequences of past wrongs is by offering gifts to the less fortunate.

In this new urban religious economy, negativity – *karma* or even the potentially inauspicious influence of Śani himself – can be relocated through devotion-based offerings made by an individual to Śani, effectively relegating the formerly fearsome deity to the status of a karmic landfill. In contrast to this urban throwaway mentality, the older, rural religious economy of the type documented by Raheja was predicated on a recycling policy of sorts: in this world, Śani's influence is inauspicious and inevitable, and therefore must be transferred to another person. It is difficult to know what this trend means for the *dakaut* community of Delhi and the northwestern part of India. Certainly the pride that some of my *dakaut* interlocutors took in being the only individuals capable of absorbing Śani's inauspicious, fearsome influence loses value in this new economy.

Poverty in the Saturnian Age

What is most interesting about this change is the ways in which it subtly reinforces the class structures and urban poverty that have become **increasingly pronounced as India's population has grown and** many of the governmental controls on its economy have been lifted. Now, rather than passing off the inauspicious influence of Śani onto a marginalized caste group whose own self-image is, if my *dakaut* informants are any indication, **proudly built on being strong enough to "digest" the influence of Śani**, the misfortune of others has become useful and necessary: without it, those with the capacity to make charitable donations would not be able to further distance themselves from the threat of falling into poverty themselves. Suffering has not disappeared; everyone does not win. The anonymous poverty of the city has become the site of the invisible labor necessary to propel the middle class forward.¹²

¹² It is important to acknowledge that horoscopes offered by *dakauts* – the *nadi* school – has always included a section – the *sānti khāṇḍa* – which prescribes remedial measures to mitigate the effects of past-life misdemeanors (see Svoboda, p. 15-16). This means that charitable giving has a history that predates the contemporary charitable practices I describe here. The difference is that contemporary charitable practices may be performed without the involvement of *dakauts*.

This shift is readily apparent in the case of the so-called “Śāni children” of New Delhi. On Saturdays, armed with mustard-oil filled receptacles, these children solicit donations from vehicles stuck in traffic. When, in 2002, the government of New Delhi issued a ban on begging, members of the Delhi-based NGO CHETNA argued that the Śāni children would suffer as a result of it. While newspaper articles note that **these children often don’t know who Śāni is** (and are therefore certainly not *ḍakaut*), activists seemed to regard the *ḍakaut* or non-*ḍakaut* identity of the children as irrelevant, instead asserting that the ban on begging should not apply to these children primarily because they rely upon the donations of oil and grain. They also intimated that without this support, the children have no choice but to resort to stealing. After noting that these children earn around Rs. 100 (approximately USD 2) on any given Saturday, the *Times of India* quotes the director of CHETNA:

“Add to this the oil, clothes and grains collected by these people on each Saturday and one can understand the extent of the money transactions in **this work,**” he says. [...] “In most areas, agents establish Shani idols on the roadside and employ children to look after them. These children get about Rs 60 to 70 in the evening”, he says.¹³

In other words, the “child beggars” of Delhi have become Śāni’s latter-day *pujārīs* not because they are willing or able to take Śāni’s negative influence upon themselves, but rather, because it allows them to explicitly mark themselves as poor, and therefore, as the willing receptacles not of Śāni’s malevolent influence, but instead, the good-*karma*-generating charity of others. They are selling their one resource –poverty in the new neo-liberal marketplace of Śāni.¹⁴ One could argue that at least the poor benefit from charitable donations, but even if this is the case, it is also true that the transplanted urban poor come to the city because whatever the benefits of economic liberalization in India have been, they have not been far-reaching enough to alleviate rural poverty.

In a conversation I once had with a member of the management board of a Vālmīki temple in the old Delhi neighborhood of Daryaganj, I asked the

¹³ http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2002-11-16/delhi/27301089_1_traffic-signals-traffic-police-beggars. accessed 10/7/2012

¹⁴ A distinction between *ḍakauts* and Śāni “beggars” was made forcibly and repeatedly by the *ḍakaut* couple affiliated with one of the oldest Śāni temple in Delhi. It was clear that they very much wanted me to understand that they looked down on these beggars and resented them.

question I often posed to non-*ḍakauts* who facilitate temple worship of Śani: **why wasn't a *ḍakaut* hired to collect the oil offered to the newly installed Śani *mūrti* in the Vālmiki temple?** He replied with this anecdote:

Abraham Lincoln wanted to be president but as a boy he went to an **astrologer who told him that he didn't have that future in his palm** – so Lincoln took a knife and cut the necessary line in the palm of his hand! Thereafter, he would practice giving speeches to animals, standing on a big rock.¹⁵

Śani may be the enforcer of *karma*, but this story about an aspiring leader of humble origins teaches us that a bold, diligent, and – most tellingly - *armed* man can quite literally take his fate into his own hands. On the one hand, in this Saturnian Age, *karma* and caste crumble in the face of individual energy and initiative: this is a world of limitless horizons. On the other hand, the knife cuts both ways.

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¹⁵ This was an unrecorded conversation in Hindi; here I have reproduced the anecdote as it appears in my field notes.

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The Age of Kālī: Contemporary Iterations of the Kaliyug in the Kullu Valley of the Western Himalayas

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Abstract

When reflecting on contemporary life, local residents of the West Himalayan Kullu Valley often associate it with the Kaliyug, the most horrible eon according to common textual descriptions of Hindu time. This enables them to explain and invest with broader meanings the far-reaching transformations unfolding in the valley in recent years. Yet, in order to carry out this task, the Kaliyug needs to undergo several significant modifications. In particular, its temporality is reworked so that it better corresponds with the events of recent decades, and it is closely associated with the local goddess Haḍimbā, whose demonic origins and current identification with the goddess Kālī perfectly fit the wild and violent character of the age. This association, in turn, has important implications for villagers' self-perception and sense of place in the broader Indian cultural grid.

Key Words: Hinduism, Himalaya, Goddesses, Modernity, Kaliyug

It is the Kaliyug Now

Located in the Western Himalayas in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, the Kullu Valley is a rural area that is rather remote from the cultural and economic centers of the Indian plains.¹ Until recently local residents lived off traditional agriculture, horticulture, and animal husbandry, but now many of them, especially those living in or near the famous town of Manali, make their living off the tourist industry that has thrived in the area since the late 1980s. When reflecting on contemporary life, local people often associate it with the Kaliyug.

¹ I conducted field research in the Kullu Valley from 2009 to 2011 with the support of a Junior Fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies; a Selva J. Raj Endowed International Dissertation Research Fellowship from the American Academy of Religion; and a Graduate Research Fellowship from the Institute for Religion, Culture and Public Life at Columbia University, to all of which I am deeply grateful.



Fig 1: Kullu Valley, Himachal Pradesh: A view from above. Photo by Ehud Halperin.

The Hindu image of time, portrayed in the *Purāṇas* and other classical texts, is based on the notion that the universe undergoes repeated and endless cycles of creation and destruction. Each cycle is comprised of four ages (*yugās*), which advance from one to the next in an ongoing process of successive degradation. According to this view, the universe begins with the age of creation, the perfect *Ṛtayug* (also known as the *Satyug*, the age of truth), proceeds through the *Tretāyug* and the *Dvāparayug*, and arrives at the *Kaliyug*, the last and most horrible eon in the cycle. The *Kaliyug* is named after the worst possible throw in the ancient Indian game of dice, which was later personified as the male demigod *Kali*, believed to preside over this decadent age. The latter should not to be confused with the goddess *Kālī*, whose name is pronounced and spelled with long vowels. The *Kaliyug* is considered a time of moral degradation, deceit, greed and selfishness, sexual promiscuity, and total collapse of governance, social order, and even climatic and environmental imbalance.²

² For example, in *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* 12.2.1 (composed in the ninth or tenth century CE), Śukadeva Gosvāmī discusses the *Kaliyug* in depth. He begins his account of the evils of the age with this statement: “[D]ay after day, under the force of the inexorably powerful time, righteousness, truth, purity (both physical and mental), forbearance, mercy, duration of life, physical power, and sharpness of memory shall go deteriorating.” In the *Kaliyug*, Gosvāmī later reveals, all these aspects of life will diminish considerably and reach their lowest point (Tagare 1978).

Here, for example, is how Govind, a photographer working in the tourist industry in Manali, described the characteristics of our present time in association with the Kaliyug. In one of our conversations he asked my age, and upon learning that I was in my late thirties he said the following:

So you must have seen how much the world has changed in recent years. Previously people used to understand each other. There was love. There was harmony [*tāl me!*] ... People helped each other ... This was called Satyug ... Now it is the Kaliyug ... [People] think, "I am big!" There is no love. There is no feeling. The young are no longer thought of as young, the elders are no longer thought of as elders. People are running around trying to cut [kill] each other ... The Kaliyug is, in fact, a system - it is changing. When there is a change in the way people think, this means it is the Kaliyug.³

Amarnath, a 30-year-old devotee of the important local goddess Haḍimbā, also shared his understanding of the nature of our degenerate age. Living the life of an ascetic near the goddess's temple, which in recent years has become a must-see destination for the hordes of domestic tourists vacationing in Manali, Amarnath had a clear view of the Kaliyug:

Amarnath: Say you have some money. You can be sure that someone will rob you—in no time!

Udi: Money...

Amarnath: Money! This is the biggest thing in the Kaliyug.

Udi: The Kaliyug is about money?

Amarnath: Yes. This Kaliyug is about money. This is why it is called Kaliyug ... I explain it to you again and again—the meaning of the Kaliyug is money!

The prevalence of greed and fraud in the age of Kali is mentioned by practically everyone in the region who speaks of this subject. Similar notions can be observed in other sources in Himachal, as well. One example is the Himachali folktale that tells of a widow who asks a friend of the family to return 100,000 rupees that the husband had entrusted with him before he died. The friend denies that he ever received the sum and the two end up in the king's court. The widow swears on her son's life that she is speaking the truth, but the son immediately falls dead and the king, having no choice at this point, rules against her. Heartbroken, the widow arrives at a riverbank, where four sages reveal to her the fourfold nature of time. The fourth sage, an expert on the Kaliyug, advises her to return to the court and to claim that the amount entrusted with the friend was, in

³ Unless otherwise noted, the conversations quoted here were translated into English by me (my nickname is Udi) from Hindi and Pahari, the latter term designating the linked languages spoken in the Indian Himalayas. When I use underlining, it is to mark an English expression that was used in a sentence that was otherwise spoken in Hindi or Pahari.

fact, four times higher than the true sum. The woman, acting on this advice, sees her son restored to life and, following the king's new order, receives the fabricated amount from the dead husband's friend. The moral of the story is clear—during the Kaliyug, life and wealth are achieved by lying and cheating (Keshavchandra 2009).

Interestingly, the effects of the Kaliyug are not limited to the realm of society and culture. Vidya, a villager in her forties whose village home turns into a guesthouse during the tourist season, associated the Kaliyug with the untimely sprouting of leaves on a tree in her front yard: "Look," she said, "look at these new leaves. It is autumn now [Hindi: *patjhar*], the time of falling leaves [Hindi: *pattā jharnā*, 'falling leaves'], and yet new leaves are sprouting on this tree.... That's the way it is. It is the Kaliyug now, everything is upside down [*ultā*]."⁴ As we can see, a wide range of negative traits—greed, theft, mistrust, disharmony, delusional perceptions of self, collapse of social structure, violence, and even unnatural environmental occurrences—is identified by villagers in the Kullu Valley as characteristic of our time, and understood to be closely associated with the degenerate Kaliyug.

But why is this so? Why do people in the Kullu Valley associate their reality with the notion of the Kaliyug? How do they understand this concept? What role does it play in their lives? My goal in this article is to explore Kulluvians' use and interpretation of this important notion. I will show that, in the process, local people not only invest their rapidly changing world with intelligible meaning, but also reshape their self-perception, as well as modify the concept of the Kaliyug itself. I begin with a short background on the Kullu Valley and the far-reaching transformations it has undergone in recent years due to the massive growth of tourism in the area. I then show how local villagers associate their contemporary reality with the Kaliyug while modifying that concept to better match their life experiences. Specifically, I show how the fourfold temporality of the traditional *yuga* scheme is reduced here to a simple twofold one, and how the time span of the age of Kali is considerably shortened so as to parallel the transitions that have occurred in the region in recent years. The second part of the article examines how villagers associate the age of Kali with the important local goddess Haḍimbā and subject it to her rule. I discuss the several ways by which this association is made, the reasons for it, and its implications for locals' self-perception and sense of place in the broader Indian cultural grid.

⁴ Jangra and Sharma (2010) report that during the second half of the 20th century there was a significant reduction in average annual rainfall in the Kullu Valley, and note that since the late 1980s there has been a rise in average, minimum, and maximum temperatures there. Vedwan and Rhoades (2001) report a decrease in snowfall and a changing pattern of precipitation.

A World of Change in Two Decades

Since Himachal Pradesh was established as a separate Indian state in the 1970s, its government, realizing the great touristic potential of this hitherto remote mountainous region, has invested heavily in road construction and helped to develop a thriving tourist industry that caters mainly to domestic Indian vacationers. The Kullu Valley soon became one of Himachal's most popular destinations and the town of Manali, which is located at the northern part of the valley, has become the state's most touristic town (Jreat 2004: 164). The booming tourist industry opened up unprecedented financial opportunities for many of the region's villagers and transformed the local economy almost overnight. Chabu, the owner of a successful restaurant in the Manali Market, narrated the arrival of tourism in the area to me; this is how I summarized his account in my field diary:

[Chabu] said that the real money started arriving in the valley with the Indian tourists, in 1989. People made thousands of rupees a day. There were problems in Kashmir so they [the government] diverted tourism here [to Manali]. People simply invented prices and the tourists paid it in full. It was a bonanza time. People made in a day what they used to make in a year! Thousands of rupees ... This was THE TIME! [Chabu said:] *Vah Vah* brother, so much money, people just made tons of money, more and more; it just kept coming and coming.

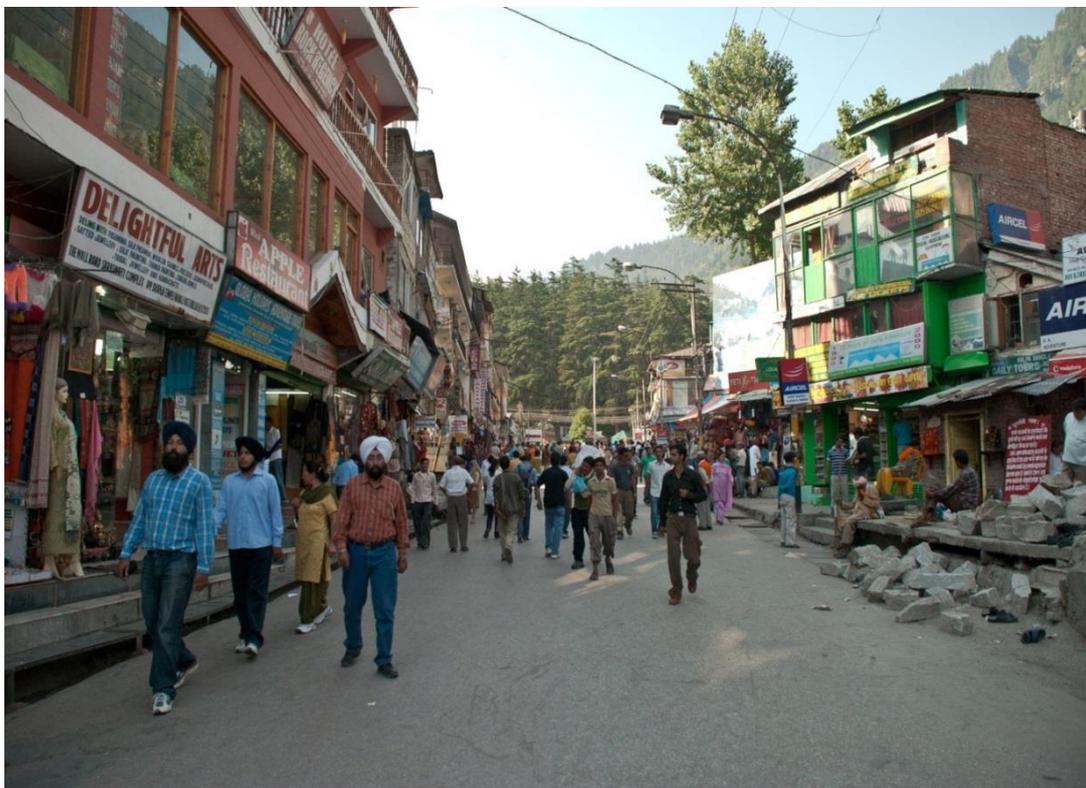


Fig 2: Mall Road, Manali Market. Photo by Ehud Halperin.

Since the mid-1990s, international backpacker tourism has also had a considerable presence and impact in the region. The residents of Old Manali, a village located a 30-minute walk from the center of town, have been particularly successful in this regard. In the past two decades the village has become a thriving hub for international travelers, boasting dozens of guesthouses, restaurants, clothing and souvenir shops, internet cafés, travel agencies, and offering a host of other tourist services. In the height of summer the village greets thousands of travelers, whose numbers at times exceed half the village's native population. Many here have given up agriculture altogether and tapped into the new tourism market. Houses were converted into guesthouses, restaurants emerged on agricultural plots, and empty spaces were rented for makeshift shops and cafés. Opportunities opened up also for those whose land was not so well located or too small to develop. Many of them became trekking guides, taxi drivers, vendors of local handicrafts, and even ski instructors during the snowy winter season. Similar developments have taken place in other villages around Manali, such as in the nearby Vashisht (Smaller 1997) and, to a lesser extent, in Dhungri village, which was the major hub of international backpacker tourism in the 1990s until the center shifted to Old Manali in the early 2000s.

As can be expected, such far-reaching cultural and economic developments have been accompanied by the introduction of new ideas and modes of behavior and have substantially transformed life in the region. While villagers embrace and celebrate many of the opportunities opened up by these developments, especially for the production and accumulation of wealth, they also lament the loss of the old ways of life and criticize what they claim are the results of this new reality: increasing greediness and dishonesty, growing alienation and social disintegration, rising violence, and even, as we have seen, climatic instability and change. Villagers claim that life has become stressful and that they are overworked and tired. Families are falling apart, they say, and respect for elders is disappearing. Locals blame each other for caring only about money, and lament the waning of social solidarity. They argue that strange new illnesses afflict relatives and neighbors and say that humans, like the food they eat, have become "chemical" and are no longer healthy and "natural." Technology, too, local people emphasize, is spreading sorrow and depression. "Think of how quickly you learn about the death of a distant relative," a local priest explained. "Bad rumors travel so fast these days with these new mobile phones." Even the weather has gone "crazy," some people observe, noting the 2010 floods in Ladakh, the disastrous 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean, and the 2011 earthquake and ensuing nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan. We live in a time of rapid decline, residents of the Kullu Valley conclude, in which all aspects of life are debased.

As we have seen above, it is not uncommon for villagers to associate these distressing developments with the advance of the degenerate age of Kali. It should be noted that the sources for their knowledge about this, as well as about other theological concepts, are hard to determine. When asked directly, local people often say that they have "heard" about it somewhere (*esā sunā*) or learned it from their elders (*bujurg*). They often add that this knowledge can be found in "books," though they do not usually name those books nor do they possess actual copies. They are, however, certain that such books indeed exist somewhere and that they contain in written form much of the common knowledge which is here orally transmitted. Interestingly, in recent years, television has also become a major source of information for local people and they often refer to a "TV program" they saw as the basis for their knowledge.

It should also be mentioned that while the notion of the Kaliyug is no doubt central in local villagers' reflections on their contemporary lives, it is not the only concept they draw upon in this regard. For example, when discussing the deteriorating climatic conditions, villagers do not blame them exclusively on the Kaliyug but on their own behavior, as well. Whereas the *yuga* scheme implies a deterministic process of cosmic degeneracy that is impervious to human actions, villagers often do take responsibility for what is happening, pointing to their own immoral conduct and degenerating relationships with one another, the environment, and the gods, as the reasons behind the change. Understanding the climatic disturbances to be taking place *because of* human conduct and not *concomitantly with* it, as the Kaliyug model would have it, villagers thereby subvert the logic of the entire scheme. At other times, local people explain the climatic changes through competing apocalyptic prophecies, such as the one associated with the South American Mayan civilization (Sitler 2006), which predicted, according to some, the end of the world in 2012. Still others blame the environmental changes on "global warming," a term they often associate with the notion of "science," itself perceived as designating a worldview that competes with their own.⁵

Nevertheless, among these diverse explanations, it is quite clear that the idea of the Kaliyug occupies an important place in villagers' thinking about and interpretations of the present. They are not alone in this: there is a long history of the Kaliyug serving as a framework for interpreting contemporary realities and investing them with broader meaning. It could be said that the concept has functioned as a sort of Geertzian "model of" reality,⁶ on the basis of which contemporary conditions were put into a

⁵ I analyze this diversity of ideas more fully in a forthcoming article in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*.

⁶ Clifford Geertz defines certain cultural patterns as "models," or "sets of symbols whose relations to one another 'model' relations among entities, processes or what-have-you in physical, organic, social, or psychological systems by 'paralleling,' 'imitating,' or 'simulating'

meaningful context and thus made sense of. For example, a 14th-century inscription from Andhra Pradesh represents the conquering Muslims in a rather formulaic manner that echoes Purāṇic predictions of the growing strength of foreign rulers during the age of Kali, and thereby explains their appearance as a consequence of the advancing age.⁷ Another, more recent example, can be found in Ann Gold's (1998) account of villagers from Ghatiyali in Rajasthan who, in reflecting on the changes that have transpired in their lives, employ a web-like "ecological logic," interconnecting concurrent transformations in landscape, agriculture, society, religion, and morality. Several villagers, Gold reports, blame these multifaceted changes on the rise of the Kaliyug. She notes that in "Kali Yuga lore from Sanskrit texts of over a millennium ago, we find remarkably resonant images linking selfish behavior with ecological disaster," (Gold 1998: 184) and that the link makes this concept perfect for explaining a current reality pervaded by such traits.⁸ Likewise, associating contemporary developments with the Kaliyug enables Kulluvians to invest the changes occurring in their lives with broader meaning, thereby rendering them intelligible and even, as we will see, acceptable. However, in order for the Kaliyug to carry out this task properly, it must first be modified so that it better matches villagers' lived experiences and thus is made relevant to their lives.

them." A model is a *model of reality*, when what is stressed in it is "the manipulation of symbol structures so as to bring them, more or less closely, into parallel with the pre-established nonsymbolic system, as when we grasp how dams work by developing a theory of hydraulics or constructing a flow chart. The theory or chart models physical relationships in such a way—that is, by expressing their structure in synoptic form—as to render them apprehensible; it is a model of reality" (Geertz 1973: 93).

⁷ The Vilasa Grant of Prolaya Nayaka of Andhra Pradesh, dated 1325-1350 C.E (Talbot 1995: 697).

⁸ Additional examples can be found in Tulsīdāsa's *Rāmacaritmanas*, where the crow Bhuśuṅḍī's account of the Kaliyug reveals a time of collapsing social order (*varṇadharmā*) and of *śūdras* rising to power and status. This description reflects, in fact, Tulsīdāsa's own views of his time (late 16th century) and his distaste for the caste-rejecting *bhakti* movements (*avarṇadharmi bhakti*), whose growing popularity he ascribed to the advance of the Kali age (Lorenzen 2004: 201). Kelly Alley describes how priests (*paṇḍas*) in Varansi, much like the Rajasthani villagers mentioned by Gold, "feel caught up in a moral and cosmic degeneracy which sets the context for their social concerns. In their accounts of the present degenerate state of the world, *paṇḍas* deflect blame from human agency by pointing toward a cosmic design in which truth turns against humankind" (Alley 1998: 314). In their view, the Kaliyug accounts for the lax ritual atmosphere near the holy Ganga, the diminishing respect for the river, her present unclean state, and the waning of their own moral authority. Christopher Pinney's work offers a final example: he examines the response of high-caste village employers in Madhya Pradesh to the introduction of factories in their region, which provide work and thereby empower low-caste workers from the surrounding villages. These high-caste employers "articulate a very negative view of the factory, seeking to project it as part of the degenerate Kaliyug which is associated with machinery, the goddess Kālī, and a dangerous and unstable modernity" (Pinney 1999: 78).

Temporal Modifications of the Yuga Scheme

The image of the *yuga* scheme that emerges from conversations with local villagers is considerably different from the traditional scheme described in classical Hindu texts. First, villagers tend to relate to only two, rather than to four, eons: (1) The Satyug—the first age in the cycle and a perfect time of truth, abundance, and moral conduct; and (2) the Kaliyug—the present age of sin, dishonesty, and total disintegration. Second, local residents alter the periodization of the eons, associating the transition from the first to the last with the changes introduced in the Kullu Valley in recent times. In other words, listening to how people in Kullu talk about the cosmic eons, one easily gets the impression that they hold a rather extreme, dualistic view of time, according to which the universe abruptly and quite recently progressed from one pole to the other: the perfectly positive age of truth gave way to the horribly negative age of Kali. This, we should note, is not stated explicitly by the villagers, who are quite aware of the traditional fourfold periodization of time, which they sometimes mention in their accounts. Still, as we will now see, this perception is implicit but persistent in their accounts of their lived reality.

Traditionally, the Kaliyug is believed to have begun around the time of the Mahābhārata war, and dated by astronomers to 3102 BCE (Hudson 2013: 150). Accordingly, several people in Manali state that the Kaliyug commenced about 5000 years ago. Others, less preoccupied with this traditional chronology, argue that the Kaliyug must have started hundreds of thousands of years ago, possibly associating its commencement with the conclusion of the Satyug. Still others refuse to commit to any specific year-based time frame or numerical chronology and insist that the eon simply started “a very long time ago” (*bahut purāṇā hai*). These chronological variations notwithstanding, what is undoubtedly shared in all these statements is the understanding that the Kaliyug began many generations ago, long before anyone alive can remember.

Yet, as conversations proceed, a rather different periodization begins to surface. Recall, for example, how Govind began his explanation about the Kaliyug. Having learned that I was in my late thirties, he concluded that I must have witnessed “how much the world has changed in *recent* years” (my emphasis). Whereas later in our exchange he dated the beginning of the eon to the Mahābhārata war, most of the conversation revealed that, in his view, the effects of the Kaliyug became evident no earlier than the past two or three decades. Other villagers expressed similar views, conflating descriptions of the debased Kaliyug with those of the present and the very recent past. Here is how a middle-aged female villager from Old Manali expressed this association in a conversation about the dwindling snow and changing weather:

Udi: When did the weather begin to change?

Villager: Just as the eon shifted the weather also changed.
Udi: When did the eon shift?
Villager: About 10-15 years ago.
Udi: And what is the name of the present eon?
Villager: It is the Kaliyug, isn't it!⁹

This particular example is indeed unique in its explicitness, but similar notions seem to imbue almost every account of the Kaliyug offered by local residents, who regularly talk as if the age launched a mere few decades ago.

Concomitantly, the period immediately preceding the present time is often associated by local people with the perfect age of creation—the Satyug. As odd as it may seem, this association is not without consistency and logic. Whereas the present, as we have seen, is considered a degenerate time of many evils and decadent traits, people speak of their childhood years in terms that are reminiscent of the age of truth and of a world that was all good. This is true not only of elders but also of middle-aged people and even of those in their late twenties and thirties. They recall the simple, hard-working villagers who trusted and assisted each other, who were nonviolent, relaxed, and truthful. Solidarity and mutual help was common, they claim, religion was properly followed, and life was uneventful and good. In fact, almost every aspect of life in the past is portrayed as the exact opposite of the way things are experienced in the present. If the present is technological (or “chemical,” as the villagers call it), the past was natural; if the present is complex, the past was simple; if the present is a time of money and greed, the past was a time of little wealth and great generosity. Interestingly, since in the present “lying and cheating are very frequent; there is no more truth,” as the female villager quoted above stated later in our conversation, the past is most often reported as a time of decency, honesty, and—predominantly—truth. Once the concept of truth (*sat*) becomes so central to memories of childhood, the association of the latter with the age of Sat appears only natural, and the two notions begin to inform each other. Memories of childhood are soon shaped by perceptions of the Satyug no less than accounts of the Satyug are informed by memories of life just a few decades ago.

Indeed, and just as with the dating of the Kaliyug, villagers are aware of the traditional dating of the age of truth, noting it prevailed in the ancient past, many hundreds of thousands of years ago. However, one cannot fail to notice how the same villagers, when referring to their childhood years, do so in conspicuously idealistic terms befitting the Satyug. A certain elderly

⁹ “Kaliyug hei, na?” Manalians often add a negative interrogative at the end of a sentence when they wish to strengthen the claim they have just made. It functions as a sort of a rhetorical question.

person, who serves as one of several key functionaries (*kāmdār*) in the goddess Haḍimbā's rituals, described his childhood years in a particularly poignant way. He observed that it was a rather serene time, free of hostility and theft. "It used to be very peaceful here. It was so peaceful here that in childhood not only we did not lock our doors, we never even saw a door key. In the entire region you could not find even one door key. Now, even if you leave home for two hours, even for one hour, you must lock the door." Later in the conversation he passionately contrasted these early days with life in the present. He stressed that, as a child, he could not have imagined the transitions that were about to take place in the valley, even when he and his fellow villagers were warned about these coming changes by the gods.

Kāmdār: [When I was a child] the goddesses and gods said that in 20, 10 years, this is how it would be.

Udi: What do you mean by "this"? What did they say would happen?

Kāmdār: They said that there would be some wrongdoing (*galat*). People would no longer follow religion (*dharam*), they would be afraid of each other. No one would help anyone. [And] now, this period has indeed come.

Udi: Upon hearing this in your childhood, that the Mātā (goddess Haḍimbā) said that such things would happen, did you believe it? What did you think?

Kāmdār: At that time I did not believe it. It did not seem that this would happen [he repeats this sentence three times]; that we would witness it ourselves. These were very calm times. It was very peaceful back then.

Despite obvious suspicions that villagers' accounts of past conditions in the valley are shaped more by nostalgia than by objective reality, there are many indications that the changes that have taken place in the region since the arrival of roads, tourism and, with these, capitalist modernity, are indeed far-reaching and real. Indeed, the introduction of motor vehicles in the 1960s¹⁰ and the construction and expansion of residential areas have transformed the physical landscape extensively; new consumption patterns have legitimized the previously shameful act of purchasing produce in the market instead of growing it oneself; and changes in sartorial conventions have made it socially unacceptable for children to wear dirty or worn-out clothes. These and other examples indicate the authenticity of the contrast reported by Kulluvians between contemporary reality and the life they lived

¹⁰ Chetwode, who trekked from Simla to Kullu in 1931, revisited the area in 1963 and wrote the following in this regard: "We were repeatedly enveloped by clouds of dust from passing motor traffic which spoilt my delight in nature. I remembered what a popular pony trek this used to be in the old days of the British Raj and I could not believe that 'progress', in the form of the beastly internal combustion engine, had so completely metamorphosed this well-trodden route" (Chetwode 1989: 14).

until just a few decades ago.¹¹ Thus, if we are now living in the Kaliyug, it is only logical to conflate the contrasting, very recent past, with the perfect age of Sat.

Yet, if the present is identified with the Kaliyug, and the immediately preceding period is thought of as the Satyug, then what about the two middle ages—the Tretāyug and the Dvāparayug? Where do they fit in this local temporal scheme? Indeed, they do not. Once more, while addressing the *yuga* scheme explicitly, local people sometime do mention the second and third eons, but in casual conversation the Tretā and Dvāpara *yugas* completely disappear from their accounts. Thus, while villagers living in the Kullu Valley are aware of the traditional articulation of the cosmic fourfold temporal scheme whose time span stretches beyond hundreds of thousands of years, in less meticulous formulations presented in casual conversation, they refer to a modified scheme, which is comprised of two eons alone: the Satyug, which is understood to have prevailed until very recently, and the Kaliyug, which is believed to have commenced rather abruptly two or three decades ago and to have since reshaped contemporary life in radical and observable ways.

Understanding the material, environmental, and mostly behavioral changes as resulting from such a deterministic shift in cosmic conditions naturally reduces human responsibility for them and justifies those who embrace these changes either out of choice or because they find them hard or impossible to resist. Premu, a villager in his early thirties, expressed this notion quite bluntly:

This is the Kaliyug. The gods say [to the people]: “What will you do? You cannot do a thing ... The *yug* has set in [*lag gayā*]” ... They say that we are not to be blamed for this ... The gods said, “The Kaliyug is coming, and people will lie. People will cheat. Children are going to kill fathers, sons ... This day is coming—what will you do? You won’t do a thing.” This is the nature of our time.

As the progress of time is completely oblivious to, and unaffected by, human actions, the all-encompassing degeneracy that it entails is entirely beyond people’s control or moral responsibility.

¹¹ Ann Gold, relating similar accounts by Rajasthani villagers about their own past, reaches similar conclusions. She writes, “I have more than once encountered skepticism when presenting these interview texts to American audiences. Some suggest that nostalgia or a ‘good old days’ mentality may be at work in Ghatiyalians’ memories of verdure and social harmony ... I am convinced that the changes in landscape and in society witnessed by Ghatiyalians (and by much of the subcontinent) over the past fifty years are truly unprecedented” (Gold 1998: 186).

The Age of the Goddess Haḍimbā

Another most interesting aspect of the reiterations of the Kaliyug in present-day Kullu Valley takes place among devotees of the important local goddess Haḍimbā. They tend to intimately associate the eon with their goddess and, at times, even subjugate it to her rule. Dulheram, an elderly man from Old Manali village, emphasized this point repeatedly in our ongoing exchanges about this topic:

Dulheram: Do you know what the present age is?

Udi: It is the Kaliyug.

Dulheram: It is the Kaliyug, isn't it? The name Kali is Kālī. This is her *yug* [he points to Haḍimbā temple] ... Kaliyug belongs to Kālī!

The goddess Haḍimbā is considered by many in the Kullu Valley the guardian deity of the region. She is seen as a powerful goddess, and she is highly respected throughout the valley. She is offered a buffalo sacrifice whenever exceptional disturbances develop in the region. Haḍimbā is said to have crowned the founding father of the traditional royal dynasty in ancient times. Her support in this affair is ritually commemorated during the Daśahrā festival celebrated in the Valley's capital every year, where Haḍimbā visits the king's palace and is entitled to unique ceremonial privileges. Haḍimbā's temple, which was built in the 16th century by an important king in the lineage named Bahadur Singh, is a three-tier, pagoda-like structure decorated with wooden reliefs and horns of sacrificed rams, situated in the midst of a majestic pine grove about two miles uphill from the center of Manali town.

Haḍimbā is identified by her devotees as a forest demoness (*rākṣasi*) whose marriage to the Pāṇḍava hero Bhīm is recounted in the famous epic *Mahābhārata* ("The Slaying of Haḍimbā," *Mahābhārata* 1(9)139-144).¹² According to the story, Haḍimbā used to live in a forest with her cannibal brother Haḍimb, who one day sent her to kill and fetch the flesh of a group of people whose scent he suddenly smelled. But when Haḍimbā saw the group of sleeping people, who were none other than the renowned Pāṇḍava brothers roaming the region after escaping the burning house of lacquer, she immediately fell in love with the handsome, well-built Bhīm, the second of the five brothers. Assuming the form of a beautiful maiden, Haḍimbā revealed herself to Bhīm and disclosed to him her brother's evil plan. A fierce battle ensued between Bhīm and Haḍimb and by its end the latter lay dead. Haḍimbā, now left alone, insisted that Bhīm should marry her. Yudhiṣṭhir, the eldest of the Pāṇḍavas, agreed, as long as Haḍimbā

¹² See, for example, Van Buitenen (1973: 294-302). The name "Haḍimbā," we should note, is unique to the Kullu Valley. In other versions of the epic, this famous *rākṣasi* is called Hiḍimbī, or Hiḍimbā. The history of goddess Haḍimbā, and the consolidation of her identity in the past several decades, is a topic I examine closely in my research and intend to develop in future publications.

promised to spend only her days with Bhīm and to make sure he returned before sunset. The marriage was consummated and Haḍimbā gave birth to a giant son named Ghaṭotkaca (“shiny-like-a-pot,” baldheaded), with whom she remained in the forest after the Pāṇḍavas had left. Later, during the great Kurukṣetra war, Ghaṭotkaca was summoned by Bhīm to the battlefield. Arjun, the third Pāṇḍava brother and the world’s greatest archer, was facing almost certain death, as his archenemy Karṇ had prepared a never-failing spear (*amogha śakti*; see van Buitenen 1975: 793) that could only be used once and that he was planning to use on Arjun. But Haḍimbā’s son Ghaṭotkaca wrought great havoc among Kaurava’s allies, and as the forces were nearing annihilation, Karṇ was forced to fire the spear at Ghaṭotkaca. Lifting the threat to Arjun’s life by sacrificing his own, Ghaṭotkaca thereby secured the Pāṇḍava’s eventual victory in the war. Hāḍimbā’s associations with the *Mahābhārata* are highly appreciated by the many domestic Indian tourists visiting her temple near Manali. They are sometimes surprised, as well as quite fascinated, to find this famous epic *rākṣasī* worshiped in Manali as a goddess. The *pujārīs*, dedicated to resolving the mystery, explain that Haḍimbā’s marriage to Bhim, a *ksatriya* prince, and her mothering of Ghaṭotkaca, an appreciated hero, changed her demonic nature (*rākṣasī jāti*) and turned her into a goddess (*devī*). The signboards situated in the temple yard also highlight her divine status — they read: “in Kullu, she [Haḍimbā] is believed to be an incarnation of the most powerful goddess Durgā and Kālī” — and a well-known local tale reveals that she was, in fact, Kālī all along. This tale is nicely presented in a song, written and performed by a renowned local singer named Rakesh Thakur:¹³

Om goddess Haḍimbā, greetings. Greetings great Kālī.
Om goddess Haḍimbā, greetings. Greetings great Kālī.
 In the third eon¹⁴ there lived a demon named Haḍimb, who was a tyrant and an oppressor.
 He used to rule the region of Kullu, and oppress humanity.
 Thinking how he could be killed, the wise men and sages called you [Haḍimbā] for help.
 They worshiped you, wishing the death of this wicked demon.
 The great Kālī showed her compassion and promised to kill the demon. Durgā plotted a scheme and was born as Haḍimb’s sister.¹⁵

¹³ This song is recorded, together with other devotional poems, on a CD titled *Hits of Rakesh Thakur* that is sold in Manali’s market.

¹⁴ According to the *Mahābhārata*, this episode took place *before* the final war, which is traditionally perceived as the beginning of the Kaliyug. Therefore, the story of Haḍimb and his sister Haḍimbā’s marriage to Bhim is dated by Rakesh Thakur to the Dvāparayug, or the third eon.

¹⁵ Haḍimbā is identified with both Durgā and Kālī, who are often identified with each other in other contexts, too. It is Kālī, however, who is most often referred to by devotees in this regard.

The rest of the poem describes Bhim's killing Haḍimb with the help of Haḍimbā, the birth and death of Ghaṭotkaca, the crowning by Haḍimbā of the founding father of the local ruling dynasty, and the goddess's important ritual role in the annual Daśahrā festival. The significant point here is the complete identification of Haḍimbā with the goddess Kālī. The former is portrayed as an incarnation of the latter, born on earth in order to save the seers and sages, and humanity at large, from the evil tyrant Haḍimb.



Fig 3: Tourists waiting in line in front of the Haḍimbā temple. Photo by Ehud Halperin.

This identification, however, still does not explain why her devotees so closely associate Haḍimbā with the Kaliyug. Consider, for example, how Takram, a middle-aged villager who lives proximate to Haḍimbā's temple, described the intimate connection between the goddess and the *yuga*. Having detailed the ills of the degenerate age, he added: "This is why [the eon is called] Kālī Yug. Haḍimbā, my Kālī¹⁶—this is her time... From this comes Kālī, Kaliyug ... Nowadays, everything—all that is good or bad—it is all in her hands!"

One is, of course, tempted to think that the association of Haḍimbā, as Kālī, with the Kaliyug stems from the phonetic proximity between "Kālī," the name of goddess, and "Kali," the name of the *yuga*. These two words, however, do not sound terribly similar to the trained Indian ear. The

¹⁶ Tekram often referred to Haḍimbā as "my Kālī." Doing so, he would often point to her small shrine in his home.

difference between the long vowels in “Kālī” and the short ones in “Kali” are not lost on native speakers of Hindi and other Indian languages. Interestingly, it is mostly in Western feminist and New Age literature that the association between the age of Kali and the goddess Kālī is made explicitly, as a result of this phonetic trap.¹⁷

This being said, one should nevertheless take notice of the creativity and semantic flexibility underlying common interpretations of the term Kaliyug in contemporary India, where the memory of Kali, the male demigod, seems to be fading away. Thus, for example, many nowadays understand the term Kaliyug to mean the “age of machines.” Assimilating the ending “i” sound of Kali into the opening “y” sound of *yug*, speakers often pronounce the term as Kalyug, a pronunciation that easily lends itself to the above interpretation since, among other meanings, *kal* in Hindi indicates a device, instrument, or machine.¹⁸ Other creative linguistic explanations that I encountered in Kullu were based on the much more common interpretation of *kal* as yesterday or tomorrow. In the following conversation, Ramesh Sharma, one of the Haḍimbā’s priests, indicates even further the flexibility of the term in common use:

Udi: What is the meaning of Kalyug?

Ramesh: It means... I mean... the age of *kal* [*kal ka yug*].

Udi: What does *kal* mean?

Ramesh: *Kal* means tomorrow. It means that in any given time... It [the world] can be finished in any moment! *Kal* means destroy ... It means that nobody knows for how much longer tomorrow will keep coming ... Nobody knows for how long it will keep coming and when it will be finished.

In another conversation, a young villager who had just finished high school presented yet another interpretation: “The true meaning of *kal* is *kālā*. *Kālā*

¹⁷ As Rachel Fell McDermott points out, “[T]he most typical mistake in this [New Age] literature occurs with regard to the name Kālī itself. Spelled without its diacritics, Kālī is easily mistaken for Kali. But the term Kali originally referred to the worst possible throw of the dice and was later personified as Kali, the male demigod who presides over the fourth and most decadent of the four Hindu ages, the Kali Yuga. To state that the Kali Yuga illustrates the demonization of Kālī is to base an argument on a straightforward case of inadequate transliteration” (McDermott 1996: 293).

¹⁸ Christopher Pinney, for example, finds this interpretation among residents of Nagda in Madhya Pradesh: “The demon *kali* did once exist in the popular visual consciousness ... But this *kali* has faded from consciousness and in the absence of this demon *kali*, modernity becomes a *kalyug*, an age of machines. Indeed, it is not only Shyam Benegal’s film which is spelt *kalyug*; most *panchangs* (almanacs) use the same spelling, and in Bhatiusuda individuals are just as likely to say *kalyug* as *kaliyug*. In the absence of *kali* they become one and the same and my questions concerning machinery and the *kaliyug* frequently produced an irritated bafflement—‘of course it is the *yug* of *kal*—what else can it be?’” (Pinney 1999: 93). Scholars working in other regions of India have related similar accounts to me in the context of private conversations, as well.

means darkness [*andherā*]. Darkness means that there is [no] knowledge... lying... sin... dirty things are being done ... The literal meaning is 'the age of darkness.'¹⁹ All these examples illustrate that Haḍimbā's devotees may be influenced by the phonetic proximity of Kālī and Kali when associating the goddess with the Kaliyug, even though they often do not state this connection explicitly. In any event, there are other, more substantial factors driving this association, to which we will now turn.

Every once in a while, when faced with an exceptionally interrogative visitor, Haḍimbā's *pujārīs* recall a lesser-known episode in the goddess's biography. Ramesh was again helpful in narrating this story:

When Krishna heard about the sacrifice made by Ghaṭotkaca [giving his own life for the sake of saving Arjun's], he went before Haḍimbā and told her: "I salute you!" Haḍimbā then replied: "Lord, I have nothing left! I had a son, but I gave it away for the sake of *dharma*. Now what will I do? Where will I go?" So he [Krishna] said, "Go and I will give you my blessing. Go and do penance [*tap karo*]. In the Kaliyug, which is the eon that is presently underway ... so many people will worship you! They will worship you like they will worship no other god or goddess... you will be the greatest goddess. You will have the powers of all [the other gods]. This is what he [Krishna] said.

While Ramesh did not mention any reference by Krishna to Haḍimbā's identity during the Kaliyug, other devotees noted that the god predicted that she would be worshipped as Kālī. Haḍimbā, advised thus by Krishna, retreated to the mountains near Manali and performed prolonged and arduous penance in a small cave, now enshrined inside her forest temple. This version of Haḍimbā's deification is absent from common tellings of the *Mahābhārata*²⁰ and is most likely of local origin.²¹

¹⁹ The designation of the Kaliyug as the "age of darkness" is not uncommon in India and appears in scholarly literature as well. The Kaliyug is also referred to in similar terms in Mārkaṇḍeya's account of the eons to Yudhiṣṭhira in the *Mahābhārata* (3(37)188.46), where he notes that during this age "the world will be swallowed by the darkness of ignorance" (Van Buitenen 1975: 593). The text uses the term *tamas* to describe this darkness, which does not bear the same relation to the term *kali*, as the young villager claimed.

²⁰ I was not able to locate this or any similar version either in the Critical Edition (Sukthankar 1933-1966) or in any of the common translations to English (e.g., Dutt 1994; Ganguli 1883-1896; Van Buitenen 1973). This episode is also missing from the famous television series that was produced by B.R. Chopra and aired on Doordarshan from 1988 until 1990, and which informs much of the popular knowledge about the *Mahābhārata* among the domestic tourists who visit Manali.

²¹ Haḍimbā's *pujārīs*, who are sometimes met with doubtful looks when telling this story to temple visitors, explain that while the latter may be familiar with the main events of the epic, they are obviously unaware of how the story ended. The tourists' acquaintance with the events that followed the great war is limited, hence their ignorance concerning the final deification of Haḍimbā.

In a conversation conducted in English, Rakesh Thakur, the singer mentioned above, likewise conflated Haḍimbā with Kālī and assigned her a supreme role during the Kaliyug:

Rakesh: You know, all the people have become selfish ... That's why God is angry. God needs to keep the balance. You know how many people are born every day? ... This is why sometimes God needs—some area, some land, some population—it should be destroyed.

Udi: Does Haḍimbā say anything about this?

Rakesh: Haḍimbā is Durgā, you know. So when something happens on earth, or anywhere else—something is being destroyed, if there is war in the world, a war of any country—this means that this is her doing ... Now it is [the time of] Durgā. It is her time. Māhāviṣṇu and Śiva are at the back... It is like when it is your time [to take care of] your family. You have a job ... everyone in your family is dependent on you. So like that, in this time, the Kaliyug, it is Kālī!

Udi: You mean that Kālī is in charge during the Kaliyug?

Rakesh: In charge! [Rakesh is very satisfied with this phrase. It fits exactly what he wanted to say.]

In accordance with Krishna's promise, Rakesh identified Haḍimbā with Kālī and portrayed her as the overseer of the Kaliyug who is in charge of everything that occurs during it. No less important is the fact that he believed Haḍimbā to be responsible for every calamity, destruction, and act of violence that takes place in our time. This is yet another underlying reason for the association of Haḍimbā with the Kaliyug—her original demonic nature, which corresponds closely with the essentially inauspicious character of the age.

Whereas at present Haḍimbā is celebrated around Manali as a goddess (*devī*), her demonic origins are not at all forgotten. A Hindi signboard located near the temple does not fail to mention that "from birth, Haḍimbā was a *rākṣasī*," although it immediately clarifies that "having renounced the world and performed austerities, she became a goddess." Another sign, situated by a tree shrine dedicated to Ghaṭotkaca, also mentions Haḍimbā's notorious past: "The hero Ghaṭotkaca's birth took place in the womb of Mātā Hadimba (who was a *rākṣasī* by birth) for a special purpose." Another example of this demonic association is evident inside her temple: here Haḍimbā is worshiped as a huge pair of feet carved in rock, and their size is said to fit the large body features expected of a *rākṣasī*. The goddess's demonic origins also come up in connection with the bloody animal sacrifices that are offered to her on regular basis. This traditional practice, increasingly criticized by tourists and recently also by regional authorities, is often explained by devotees in relation to the goddess's essentially demonic

nature. "After all, she is a *rākṣasī*, no?" they argue, thereby justifying the goddess's taste for blood.

Not only is the demonic aspect of Haḍimbā's character not concealed, it is often celebrated as an indispensable aspect of her cosmic role. The "special purpose" mentioned in the signboard as the reason for Ghaṭotkaca's birth is intimately tied to Haḍimbā's demonic origins. Devotees explain that it refers to the necessary role played by Ghaṭotkaca in the final epic war. Here is how Ramesh explained this point:

There is this thing about her [Haḍimbā] being a *rākṣasī*. She took on this [*rākṣasī*] form for a reason. Karṇ had a weapon which he kept for killing Arjun. [This weapon] needed to be stopped. Now, when a *rākṣasa's* son is born, he grows up in no time, immediately. This happens very fast. This is why she [Haḍimbā] took on the form of a *rākṣasī*. The Mātā had made him [Ghaṭotkaca] very powerful, so he could finish off all of the Kauravas ... Haḍimbā gave him all her power. She gave him weapons too. [She gave him] everything. Like a guru. He was so powerful. He was just like Hanuman...

Haḍimbā's demonic character is thus celebrated for its unique ability to instantly produce a powerful warrior who was urgently needed by the Pāṇḍavas in their battle against the Kauravas. Her *rākṣasī* nature was not a liability, but rather Haḍimbā's unique advantage and what enabled her indispensable contribution to the military effort.



Fig 4: Ghaṭotkaca's tree shrine. Photo by Ehud Halperin.

The great importance that devotees ascribe to Haḍimbā's demonic personality is central to her association with the Kali age. After all, the age itself is considered violent and immoral and fraught with demonic qualities. Vidya articulated the *rākṣas*-like character of our time most vividly:

Nowadays, even if it is midnight or so, I can go out and walk in the village. [Doing this] I am not afraid of *bhūts* [ghosts, evil spirits, *rākṣasas*],²² I am afraid of people. You see someone and you think: "Who is this person?" Nowadays people are afraid of human beings, not of *bhūts*. One hundred years ago, 20, 25, 30, 40 years ago it was different. Say someone was afraid of *bhūts*. Then, if he suddenly saw a person coming towards him he would think, "Brother, here is a human being!" and he would not feel the fear anymore. Today it is not like this. Today, if someone sees another person at night he thinks, "Oh, there is someone there. Is he following me?" Today the people are not afraid of *bhūts*, they are afraid of human beings. On seeing another person, he runs away on a different path ... People used to say [to their children], "Beware of *bhūts*." Now we tell them, "Beware of people." Human beings have turned into *bhūts*."

It is important to note that the close correlation between Haḍimbā's demonic qualities and the character of the age of Kali are acknowledged during communications with the goddess, as well. When asked by her devotees whether she approves of a grand buffalo sacrifice that is to be made in her honor, the goddess initially objects to the practice, announcing through her possessed medium that she does not want people to think of her as growing too "hungry." Hunger, whether for blood or food, is a common metaphor in the Kullu Valley for greed, which is, as we have seen, one of the epitomes of the Kaliyug. Thus, the violent and bloodthirsty *rakṣasī*-cum-goddess, whose eventual acceptance of the sacrifice reveals her essential hunger, makes a perfect match for the present age, which has made people hostile and insatiably hungry.

But what could drive this association of Haḍimbā with the Kaliyug? What purpose might it serve? What could be the motivations of Haḍimbā's followers for advancing this affinity between their goddess and the eon? I suggest four interconnected answers to these questions. First, devotees of this hitherto peripheral mountain deity have witnessed their goddess rise in status concomitantly with the growth of tourism to the area, and during a period which they equate with the Kaliyug. The close associating of Haḍimbā with the eon and the high status promised to her by the god Krishna during it help to explain the unprecedented and rather sudden

²² Later in our conversation, Vidya and the other female neighbors who were participating explicitly equated *bhūts* with *rākṣasas*.

popularity that the goddess has gained in recent years among the hordes of visiting outsiders. Second, the association with the Kaliyug justifies the worship and fortifies the legitimacy of this important local deity whose *rākṣasī* origins may cause some visiting tourists to question, if not outrightly to reject, the propriety of her veneration as a Hindu goddess. The association does so not by stripping the goddess of her demonic traits and thereby pacifying her but, on the contrary, by celebrating those very traits as uniquely appropriate for overseeing the age of Kali.²³ Third, the legitimation of the goddess no doubt renders her community of followers, who themselves are often perceived as “primitive” and “backward” by the people of the plains (see Elmore 2005: Chapter 3), more acceptable by extension. By granting their goddess such a unique status in the age of Kali, they are, in fact, legitimizing their own standing and creating an acceptable place for themselves in the broader Indian cultural grid. Finally, once she is identified as the presiding deity of the Kaliyug, Haḍimbā is then understood as especially suitable for providing protection and guidance to her followers during these turbulent times.

Conclusion

As has happened before in Indian history, and in other places across the country in recent times, the notion of the Kaliyug serves in the Kullu Valley as a model of reality and as a prism through which to view contemporary life. Although it is not the only available paradigm for understanding the present, the Kaliyug has an important hold on people’s minds and on the way they see the world in which they live. Significantly, the notion of the Kaliyug not only shapes villagers’ views of their present conditions, but is itself reworked and modified in the process, whether implicitly or explicitly. First, implicitly, its temporality is adapted so that it better corresponds with the dramatic transformations that have taken place in the region in recent times. It becomes one of a two-, rather than of a four-age scheme, and its time span is considerably shortened to appear as if it originated a mere few decades ago. Second, the Kaliyug is explicitly associated with and even subjected to the local goddess Haḍimbā, whose demonic origins and current identification with the goddess Kālī perfectly fit the wild and violent character of the age. For those embracing this view, the far-reaching transformations unfolding in the valley in recent years are invested with broader meanings and portrayed as the result of all-pervasive cosmic processes. Human responsibility for the moral and environmental degeneration is dismissed and complicity, either chosen or forced, is justified. At the same time, the local presiding goddess and, by extension, her hitherto peripheral devotees acquire a higher standing, which explains the rising popularity of their region in recent years as well as grants them,

²³ On the pacification of violent and wild goddesses see, for example, McDermott (2001).

at least in their own eyes, a new and respected place at the sociocultural pan-Indian table.

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Alternative Discourses of Kali Yuga in Ayyā Valī¹

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Abstract:

This paper explores the centrality of the notion of the Kali Yuga in a contemporary “Hindu” religious phenomenon called Ayyā Valī² (henceforth, AV), which is spread primarily among the Cāṇārs (Nāṭārs)³ in the southern districts of Tamilnadu (especially in Kanyakumari District). The key figure in the AV movement is its founder, Ayya Vaikundar, who was born in 1809 in the erstwhile princely state of Travancore. This state was described as a “Hindu state par excellence,” as it was ruled according to the ideology of *varnashramadharma* (Hindu social system of class and stages of life), and as a result, the low-caste Cāṇārs experienced multiple forms of discrimination, exploitation, and oppression (Patrick 2003: 23-60). Vaikundar described this period as the Kali Yuga and identified the king of Southern Travancore as Kalineecan (a personification of the principle of evil) and an *avatār* (incarnation) of the mythical figure Kroni⁴. For Vaikundar, the reign of Kalineecan was a clear sign of the prevalence of an evil force called *kalimāiyai* (an illusory power of evil) in the state of Travancore. This article focuses on how AV seeks to identify the presence of *kalī*⁵ (evil) in

¹ A short version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting (2012) of American Academy of Religion at Chicago as part of panel that was organised by Amy Allocco “It’s The End of the World as We Know It’: Contemporary Understandings of the Kali Yuga.” I owe a huge gratitude to Amy Allocco for her initiative in organising the panel which led to the publication of this journal issue.

² Ayyā Valī in Tamil means ‘way or path’ of Ayyā (respected Sir or father), who is Vaikundasamy for the followers of the movement. All the Tamil words in this essay except the names of person(s) or place(s) are transliterated according to the Tamil lexicon style.

³ To remain true to AV’s scriptural traditions, the name “Cāṇārs” is used throughout the essay. This usage emphasizes the marginal status of the social group that was once called Cāṇārs. (see Patrick 2003: 27), although they now prefer to be called “Nāṭārs.”

⁴ Kroni, a mythical figure perhaps uniquely significant to AV tradition alone, is a personification of evil. He was born in the first *yuga* (Neetiya Yuga) with mountain-sized big limbs. His thirst and hunger was so immense that he emptied the waters of the sea, swallowed Kailash, and was about to devour the whole universe before he was cut into six pieces, each of which will reincarnate in the subsequent *yugas* (see Patrick 2003: 203-4 and p. 71 of this article for more details)

⁵ The use of *kali* in AV is quite innovative in the sense that AV’s discourses conceive *kali* always as an impersonal and independent evil force and refer to it mostly in noun forms, while Sanskritic Hindu literature uses *kali* mostly in adjectival forms. (The meanings given for *kali* in Sanskrit dictionaries do not refer to *kali* as evil in a noun form). As we will see in this article, for AV *kali* is basically an inner evil force. The *Kasi Rahasya* is perhaps the only text that considers *kali* an inner state (Gonzalez-Reiman 2010: 132). Perhaps

this world, equates it with caste discrimination, injustice and exploitation of the poor and the lowly, and attempts to launch a decisive battle against it, thereby creating an alternative discourse to the Kali Yuga theory outlined in Sanskritic Hinduism. AV's alternative to Kali Yuga discourse and its introduction of the novel idea of the Dharma Yuga can be construed as a subaltern resolution of the "inner conflict" of Hindu tradition (Heesterman 1985: 10-25). As such, the principles of modernity are seen to be coterminous with the defining characteristics of the Dharma Yuga, AV's emancipatory utopia. This essay is based on the material taken from *Akilaraṭṭu* (AV's sacred scripture, henceforth *AT*), and its recent commentaries, as well as the writings of and interviews with some of AV's followers.

Key Words: *Hinduism, Ayyā Vali, Kali Yuga, Subaltern Counter Narrative.*

Vaikundar, Founder of Ayyā Vali

Vaikundar (who later became popularly known as Vaikundasamy⁶) was born in 1809 as Muthukkutti in a small hamlet called Sastankovil Vilai in Agastivaram Taluk of the erstwhile South Travancore State. He was the second child to his parents, Mr. Ponnnumadan and Mrs. Velaal (Patrick 2003: 77), a family of low-caste Cāṇārs, who suffered multiple forms of unjust taxations in the princely state of Travancore, as we will see later. Although born into a social group of poor palmyra climbers⁷ who normally venerated folk deities, Muthukkutti chose to worship the major religious tradition's god (i.e., the high-caste god), Vishnu, "the national deity of Travancore" (Patrick 2003: 35). He fell critically ill at the age of twenty-two and went into coma. Prompted by instructions in her dream, his mother and the family took him to Tiruchendur, a Hindu religious site in Tamilnadu to take a "holy dip" in the sea. While bathing, Muthukkutti disappeared into the sea and reappeared after three days as a totally transformed personality. This event was a turning point in the life of Muthukkutti for it was only after this

understanding the Kali Yuga as an age characterized by the quality of *tamas*, as it is in Sanskritic Hinduism (see Doniger 1988: 68), is the basis for AV viewing *kali* as an inner evil force. AV elaborately talks about the inner power of evil in its literature; its influence is described as inescapable for humans as it has sway over everything and binds all on earth. However, another popular expression in AV is *kalimāiyai*, which represents *kali* as an illusory power that can be overcome by human beings.

⁶ Vaikundasamy in Tamil means the 'Lord of Vaikuṇṭa—the abode of Visnu'. This very name itself is suggestive of the utopian mission and vision that Vaikundar came to embody.

⁷ The majority of the Cāṇārs were involved in palmyra climbing—a profession socially stigmatized—and were placed in the 'polluting category' of people, and suffered social ostracization. They were not allowed to enter the Temples, or wear shoes or golden ornaments, or carry umbrellas, or carry pots of water on the hip (See Patrick 2003: 27-8).

episode that he claimed himself to be Vaikundar, a special *avatār* of God whose primary function was to end the Kali Yuga. He also declared openly that he received a dictate from gods to undertake *tavam* (a process of penance and purification) for six years “to usher in the age of *tarmam* and to incinerate the *kali*” (Patrick 2003: 79) Vaikundar’s exhortations to people to undertake new rituals of purifications and to live with dignity and self-respect, along with his constant refrain that “To protect the lowly is *Dharma*” made him, as we will see later, a very popular religious personage. Sitting under a grand roof – reminiscent of the period’s royal palaces – in a place called Ambalapathi, Vaikundar presented himself as the king of the Dharma Yuga as he imparted religious teachings that attracted people from far and wide. According to G. Patrick, the London Missionary Society (LMS) report of 1983 mentions that a “multitude of people flocked (to him) from all parts of the provinces of Travancore and Tinnevelly (sic)” (Patrick 2003: 90). His rising fame among the masses did worry both the king, who considered him a threat to his royal power and put him through various ordeals, and the LMS missionaries, who regarded him an obstacle to their conversion agenda and described him “as a false prophet” and an “agent of Satan” (Patrick 2003: 83-84). After his death in 1851, he was buried in a tomb at a place called Swamithoppu, the headquarters of AV.

While Samuel Mateer writing in 1870 notes that while “he (Vaikundasamy) attached to himself thousands of credulous followers” (as quoted in Patrick 2003: 92) it was five of his special disciples who were responsible for spreading the revolutionary mission of AV among the common people as they traveled from place to place after his death. Scores of LMS reports of the 19th century make reference again and again to the popularity of this movement and to the followers who “affirm that the worship of Muttukutti is really a worship of the Supreme Being” (Patrick 2003: 108). This religious phenomenon grew so rapidly among low-caste people (especially the Cāṇārs) in the 19th and 20th centuries that today the movement is estimated to have seven hundred thousand adherents all over the world. His disciples and their descendants began systematizing Vaikundar’s teachings and practices during his lifetime and continued doing so after his death. This process produced an alternative religio-cultural form that is popularly known as Ayyā Valī.

This religious sect has become so famous that Vaikundar’s birthday⁸ has been declared a state holiday in the southern districts of Tamilnadu (e.g., Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, and Tuticorin) to make it possible for many thousands of devotees to worship Ayya Vaikundar’s gravesite at Swamithoppu. The popularity of AV is further underscored by the fact that a movie titled Ayyā Valī was produced and released in 2008 in order to

⁸ Vaikundar’s Birthday, known as ‘Ayya Vaikunda *Avataram*’ was declared as a public holiday in 1994 by the administration. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayyavazhi>. (assessed on 2 May 2014).

spread the movement's social message of equality and fraternity to the younger generation.

The organization's present head is Bala Prajapathi, a descendant of the Payyaṅ dynasty, which administers Swamithoppu Pathi (a shrine that houses Vaikundar's tomb).⁹ It is under his leadership that AV became quite widespread in the 1970s and 80s. He also established an institution called Anbuvanam (garden of love) close to Muthirikinaru,¹⁰ and turned that place into a site of charity. Anbuvanam today includes a residential school, a home for the aged, and a temple that offers *aṅṅatāṅam* (free food for the poor) daily. He also runs a monthly bulletin called *Anbumurasu* to propagate the teachings of Ayya Vaikundar. Bala Prajapathi was given the Kottai Ameer Award for communal harmony by Tamilnadu's government in 2003.

Another important contemporary figure in the movement is Mani Bharathi, an insightful thinker and a prolific writer. Mani Bharathi, who was born to ardent followers of Vaikundar, viz., Arumuga Perumal and Sivan Maniammai, and having been raised within the ethos, values and religious practices of the AV religion, turned out to be a great champion of the AV movement. He has displayed relentless passion in spreading the AV message through his monthly magazine, *Yuka Muḷakkam*, over the last twenty-three years. In addition to nine books (most of which are commentaries on AV) authored by him, Mani Bharathi also regularly includes in his magazine a regular column called "*Veṅṅutalkaḷum Viḷakamum*" (Petitions and Explanations) that has dealt with 3,000 questions so far. By 2012 Mani Bharathi, with the help of AV followers, had constructed about thirty AV temples (known as *Nilatāṅka*), while twenty four other temples are still under construction. He is also a good orator and a playwright, and he places these talents at the service of propagating the message of AV. His popularity among the masses is evidenced by the fact that he has presided over nearly seven hundred marriages of the AV people and has laid cornerstones for the construction of nearly ninety houses (Pandian 2012: 36-40). This article relies on interviews with these two AV

⁹ The genesis of the Payyaṅ dynasty is unclear. The most prevalent theory is that they are descendants of Podukutty, one of the sons of Paradevathai (the other son died very young) and her first husband. Paradevathai became the life-partner of Muthukkutti (i.e., Vaikundar), although they were never married. It is said that Podukutty became chief among his core disciples (the *Panividaiyalars*) and that Vaikundar affectionately used to call Podukutty "Payyaṅ," which later became the name of his dynasty. But the Payyaṅ dynasty claims that their ancestor Podukutty was born to Muthukkutti and Paradevathai, and that they are therefore the true heirs of Muthukkutti (Vaikundar). See <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/1665219> (accessed on 3 March 2014).

¹⁰ This sacred well was built by Ayya himself so that the common people could have their own place (not very common those days) to draw water for drinking and bathing. This well is situated not very far from where Ayya Vaikundar's body is buried in a temple at Swamithoppu, AV's headquarters, and today people go there first to take a shower and clad themselves in saffron (*kāvi*) dress before they proceed to the temple.

leaders, among others, in its examination of the contemporary views concerning the Kali Yuga within this sect.

Situating the Idea of Kali in AV's World-View

The notion of *kali*, which essentially means "evil," is central to AV's cosmological worldview. Ayyā Valī, the religious movement of the subaltern Cāṇārs, would necessarily look at the multiple forms of discrimination experienced by its people as forms of evil. As a Hindu religious phenomenon, AV would translate the Cāṇārs experience of social exclusivity into the popular notion of *kali*, whose origin and presence it would locate within the framework of Hindu cosmology of the ages (*yugās*). For AV, the mythology of the *yugās* is essentially a narrative about *kali*. As we shall see, AV would mythologize *kali* as an impersonal cosmic force that is all-pervasive, both visible and invisible, and simultaneously embodied and disembodied, and would elaborately describe its engulfing presence throughout all eons in various idioms and instances.

Just as *kali's* story is mythologized, so also is the story of Vaikundar, the exterminator of *kali*, whose earthly origin and soteriological mission is interwoven into a grand, divine narrative. These two mythologies are not only closely intertwined, but they also necessitate each other. One metamorphoses the other. In AV's literature, *kali* is described as an inescapable force that not only entraps everyone but manifests itself in mythological figures of different *yugās* so formidably that it requires a unique supernatural being – Vaikundar – for its annihilation. The grand narratives about Vaikundar exalt him over and above everyone else to the level of a supreme being (Bharathi 2003: 20-40 and AT : 204-216, 229-237). In them, his divine characteristics are magnified in such superlative forms that they eclipse all other gods prevalent in his time,¹¹ thereby conferring upon him the invincible power and supreme authority required to confront and decisively defeat different forms of *kali* (e.g., visible and invisible, personal and structural).¹²

AV's mythology of the *yugās* presents a total of eight eons: they are Neetiya Yuga, Chatura Yuga, Nedu Yuga, Kretha Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga, Kali Yuga, and Dharma Yuga. The first three *yugās* and the last *yuga*

¹¹ Vaikundar incorporated unto himself all of the surrounding powerful deities through symbolic marriages known as *ekanaī kalyānam* (Patrick 2003: 94, 108-9). He claimed to be the *avatār* of Mupperum Paramporul, a unitary trans-triune divine principle superior to Brahma, Siva, and Visnu, a conception of a super divine that was unfamiliar to the religious milieu of his time.

¹² In this regard Saurabh Dube observes, "The classic manner of displacement within a mythic tradition takes the form of a mythic figure totally eclipsing the other mythic figures" (1993: 147).

have no parallels in mainstream Hindu mythology.¹³ The *AT* states that in each *yuga* there will appear a demon who will be decimated by Visnu.¹⁴ In the first *yuga*, as soon as Kroni—the embodiment of *kali*—was born, he wanted to swallow the whole world to feed his insatiable hunger. Visnu, however, killed him and fragmented him into six pieces. But, each of the split fragments incarnated as a demon in each *yuga*. The first piece of Kroni was incarnate in the Chatura Yuga as Kundomasali; the second piece into Thillai Mallalan and Mallosi Vahanan in the Nedu Yuga; the third piece into Surapathran; Singamuha Suran and Iraniyan in the Kretha Yuga; the fourth into Ravanan in the Treta Yuga; the fifth into Duryodhanan in the Dvapara Yuga; and the sixth into Kalineecan in the Kali Yuga (Bharathi 2003: 24). The manifestation of *kali* in this age is distinguished from its previous forms: in the present age, as soon as *kali* takes the *avatār* of Kalineecan, the evil power occupied the minds of all human beings and enthroned itself in the hearts of all people, and started to rule the world from within (Bharathi 2012: xxvii).

AV's teaching on *kali* is unique, because it proposes that the nature of *kali* is ubiquitous and invisible in the Kali Yuga, unlike the previous six ages. According to Vaikundar, *kali* is an invisible power of evil that is present in everyone. Even today AV followers strongly believe in this idea. Most of my interlocutors were able to trace their views on *kali* back to the teachings of Vaikundar. The quotation most recalled in this regard was "*kali enṛāl eli allavē, kaṇaiyāli vēṇṭāme*" (*AT*: 224), which means "*kali* is not a mouse and you do not need any hammer to kill it." In this context, it is to be noted that informants invariably observed that during the Kali Yuga *kali* is an inner evil power that has its sway over the minds and hearts of everyone alive, making them act contrary to truth. It is only the quantum of its influence that differs from person to person for, according to Mani Bharathi, the editor of *Yuka Muḷakkam*: "*Kali* is in you, in me and in every body. Only the quantity of its presence differs. In some people it is present ninety percent and in others twenty percent" (Bharathi 2010a; 12).

It is the wretched ones who think that they are aristocrats and high castes, even though they are strongly entangled in the yoke of *kali*'s bondage. They consider the good people—who lead a righteous life—to be low castes and they have deliberately divided them into various caste groups (Bharathi 2003: 55). Under the influence of *kali*, people became caste-minded (*jāti-veṛi*) in Vaikundar's time and thus oppressed one another, especially the lower-ranked ones. Swathithirunal, the king of Travancore, became a power-monger and oppressed the poor and the weak. Because the king became the epitome of evil, Vaikundar dubbed him "Kalineecan." He

¹³ To the best of my knowledge, there is no other Hindu tradition which proposes that there are eight *yugas*. Madiga's (one of the outcastes in Andhra Pradesh region) belief in eighteen *yugas* is perhaps the only exception (Charsley 2004: 276).

¹⁴ See Patrick (2003: 203-5) for more descriptive narrative of the same.

imposed on the Cāṇārs various types of taxes—nearly three hundred of them—which included tax on palmyra trees and on women’s breasts¹⁵, on the right to grow hair and to wear gold ornaments, and taxes levied not only on the living but also on the dead (Patrick 2003: 45-6). The high-caste people made the low-caste people bonded laborers and extracted free labor from them, calling it *ūliyam* (service). With these gruesome taxes, the state coffers swelled rapidly, making it easy for the king to sponsor costly rituals and *pūjās* (ritual worship) in the temples and represent himself as the guardian of *varnashramadharmā* by faithfully discharging the duties expected of a Hindu king (Patrick 2003: 35-9). This, in turn, lent legitimacy to his kingdom as an ideal Hindu state, although this legitimacy was won at the cost of the lives of thousands of poor people. It was into this unjust and inhumane side of Swathithirunal’s reign that Ayya Vaikundar was born, and he called this rule the reign of *kali*.

The relationship between the king and the beginning of an age (*yuga*) is a much-discussed question in Sanskritic Hinduism. According to Manu, the king and his rule are not inconsequential to the conditions of the *yuga*. The king’s role in this regard is crucial as he himself could become Kali (Kane 1946: 892) and it is believed that his conduct produces conditions that are either favorable or unfavorable to the change of the *yugas*. Along similar lines, most Sanskritic sources and their interpretations would hold that the type of *adharmic* rule that the king provides is either the result or the cause of the Kali Yuga (González-Reimann 2010: 118-137). But no king like Swathithirunal, who so thoroughly supported the maintenance of the brahminical social order and promoted the well-being of Brahmins, would be indicted as an embodiment of evil. On the contrary, such a king would be celebrated as an ideal Hindu king who governed his state in total accordance with Hindu *dharma*. For instance, the *Mahabharata* would mandate that a king should “constantly suppress the unruly who do not conform to established order, and protect those who are disciplined” (González-Reimann 2010: 127). It is in this context that we should understand Vaikundar’s castigation of the reign of the king of Travancore as *kali* as a real subversion of dominant Hindu ideology. While analyzing the notion of *kali* that surfaces in AV literature and in the conversations I had with its contemporary adherents, I have identified at least three major moments and a five-fold strategy for resisting *kali* in this Kali *Yuga*.

¹⁵ It is to be noted that the low caste (Paṭṭar, Parayar, Pulaya, Cāṇār Īḷava) women were not allowed to wear any clothing above their waist. Not being able to bear this humiliation, one Īḷava woman is said to have cut off one of her breasts and presented it to the tax-collectors (Patrick 2003: 59, f.n.119). This ban on covering breasts came to an end by subaltern peoples’ agitation known as ‘Upper Cloth Revolt’ which would not have reached its decisive stage in 1858-59 without the involvement of AV people (see Patrick 2003: 181).

The Moment of Ayya Vaikundar's Birth and His Crusade against Kali

AV strongly believes that Vaikundar played an unprecedented role in ending the Kali Yuga and inaugurating the Dharma Yuga, which would be fully actualized only at the end of Kali Yuga. Nonetheless, in the battle against *kali*, the birth of Vaikundar is a decisive moment, as he sounds the death knell for *kali*. AV considers the Kali Yuga to be night and Vaikundar's birth to be equivalent to midnight. Mani Bharathi states this succinctly:

Ever since Vaikundar was born, *kali* has begun to disappear. But the time it would take to vanish is the time it has taken to set in. Vaikundar's birth is the midnight and it would take many years for the day to dawn. Ayya said 'At the time of dawn, I would assume many roles and then rule over the bigger *yuga*' [*Viṭiyum p̣ōtu vēṣam pala aṇintu viṭiyum maruvuṭaṇe p̣ērulakam ālvēne*].¹⁶

According to the adherents of AV, the purpose of Vaikunda *avatār* is to defeat Kalineecan decisively and trap him in the underworld forever, to wipe out the evil of *kali* from people's minds and to install, instead, thoughts of *dharma* in their minds and thus bring everyone under one umbrella (Bharathi 2011b). The battle against *kali* has to be waged primarily in the minds of human beings according to Mani Bharathi: "The purpose of Vaikunda *avatār* is to teach ordinary people how to sow the seed of patience, increase love and establish dharma, so that each one on his/her own can fight against *kali* in "one's self and can drive away *kali* slowly and steadily. One should exterminate *kali* in one's own mind."¹⁷

The great battle that Ayya Vaikundar launched against *kali* would become an empty narrative without capturing the multi-faceted strategy that Ayya employed to take on the evil force of *kali*. It involved a complex production of the symbolic through an ingeniously engineered process of negotiation and negation. This twin process of negotiation and negation encompassed an array of strategic acts: from appropriating old idioms and metaphors to adapting and repositioning them for a liberative praxis; from removing the traditionally assigned shackles of "impurity " of Cāṇārs through the acts of self-purification to introducing a set of dignified socio-cultural and ethical practices; from rejecting the old patterns of exploitative forms of priest-centred religious worship to developing new modes of people-centred religious acts; from confronting and overthrowing *varnashramadharmā* ideology that produced and perpetuated the oppressive rule of *kali* to creatively innovating a just and egalitarian religio-cultural world, popularly known as AV. Among the initiatives undertaken by Ayya we can single out

¹⁶ Interview with Mani Bharathi, August 17, 2012, Chennai. All interviews were conducted in Tamil, and were later translated into English by author and his friend, Nishant.

¹⁷ Interview with Mani Bharathi, August 17, 2012, Chennai.

at least a five-fold strategy that is significant and relevant to our discussion on *kali*.

Strategic Act of Self-Enhancement through Tapas (penance) and Purification

Since *kalimāiyai* is an inner source of evil that has entrapped the whole of humanity and the cosmos, the best way to destroy it is through the fire of *tapas*. That is why as soon as Muthukkutti emerged as Vaikundar *avatār* from the sea of Tiruchendur,¹⁸ the first task he undertook was a three-fold course of *tapas*: *Yuga-tapas* (penance for eon), *Jāti-tapas* (penance for caste) and *Pitir-tapas* (penance for elders). Each of these forms of *tapas* involved two years of rigorous acts of bodily mortification and self-discipline. The *AT* notes that the purpose of *Yuga-tapas* was to ensure the successful unfolding of the Dharma Yuga wherein all good people would enter into eternal life (Bharathi 2003: 55). The purpose of *Jāti-tapas* was to put an end to the divisions produced by the caste system that was introduced by the wicked, and to unify them all as one people. The purpose of *Pitir-tapas* was to liberate *Cāṅrōrs* (noble)¹⁹ who were once destined to be born as low castes, and to make disciples and companions for Vaikunda *avatār*. Just as Ayya performed *tapas* to strengthen himself so that he could carry out his mission successfully so, too, he called upon his followers, the marginal people, to undertake *tapas* to learn self-discipline, to restore self-respect, to expel the power of *kali* from within, and to build up inner capacity to counter the presence of *kali* in the outer world. The *tapas* they performed are known as *tuvaial tapas* (penance for self-purification), which involved the following actions in a manner of ritual:

They took bath and washed their clothes in the seawater thrice everyday and cooked vegetarian meal with raw rice and green-grams, and ate it only once a day. The manner of eating was that they took it directly with their mouth from the sandy ground where food had been laid.²⁰ They drank only the salty water and abstained from fish..... The remaining hours were spent in spiritual exercises. They recited certain

¹⁸ It is said that Muthukkutti fell seriously ill and became almost unconscious at the age of twenty-two when his mother, following instructions from a dream, took him to the famous Hindu religious site of Tiruchendur, where they bathed him in the sea. Muthukkutti disappeared into the sea for three days and was believed dead by all but his mother, who kept praying to the gods and waiting at the seashore for his return. It is said that it was in the sea that Muthukkutti was transformed into Vaikundar and became an *avatār* of Visnu who did not even recognize his own mother on his return (Patrick 2003: 78; Bharathi 2003: 19-20).

¹⁹Originally *Cāṅrōrs* were Cāṅārs who had divine origin in AV's mythology but later on the term would be expanded to include others as we will see later, vide p. 85.

²⁰ It is said that the cooked food was laid on the ground from which people consumed it as an act of penance.

incantations taught by persons among them who had the gift of the oracles (Patrick 2003: 96).

Those who did the *tapas* were received by people with respect and reverence. The *AT* recounts their luminous appearance as follows: "The dress of the *Nampūtiri* and other Brahmins has lost their shine, whereas that of the *Cāṇārs* shines like the sun...see what a change has come about for *Cāṇārs*! The people who awaited avidly the arrival of fish and ate it even half cooked in a greedy manner, and chewed tobacco incessantly, have transformed themselves so much" (Patrick 2003: 97). The 1892 LMS report also endorses a similar view: "It is true that their (i.e., the devotees of Vaikundaswamy) bodies and their houses are more cleanly [sic] than those of the rest" (as quoted in Patrick 2003: 97). For the people of *AV*, *tapas* is not a thing of the past but has to become a way of life for the common people. Leading a simple but disciplined life is also a form of *tapas*, as Mani Bharathi reinterprets its role in his writings: "Rightly pursued family life is the best *tapas* in the Kali Yuga" (Bharathi 2009b: 21).

The Strategic Act of Subjection to Ridicule and Humiliation

Following Vaikundar's emergence from the sea of Tiruchendur as an *avatār* of Visnu, he turned out to be a man of different calibre, and his activities and lifestyle became intriguing and unpredictable. The *AV* tradition recounts a number of incidents in which Vaikundar was reviled, ridiculed and tortured by soldiers who were sent by the king. He was beaten up, tied down, trampled upon and dragged along the streets by horses. When people noticed strange behavior in Vaikundar after his emergence from the sea, some people called him insane. To the king and the soldiers, he came across as a dubious religious leader who claimed to be an *avatār*, but could not save himself in spite of being tortured to the point of near death. They wanted to test his divine power by forcing him to act in self-defence. But when he declined, the adversaries took this as evidence of his powerlessness (Bharathi 2003: 106-113). Indeed, while Vaikundar's patience and tolerance were viewed as vulnerabilities by the opponents, they were, for the followers, robust display of his divine authority to bear humiliation and physical violence despite having the supreme divine power to trounce his opponents. Vaikundar described his patience and tolerance as a self-willed divine strategy to overcome *kali* in this *avatār*, and said, "It is my will that I should go through all these trials and tribulations and yet emerge as victorious in the end" (Bharathi 2003: 113).

While dominant Hindu discourses concerning the concept of *avatār* extol the physical might of *avatārs* to root out the wicked, *AV* reverses the discourse in which the manifold forms of humiliation suffered by Vaikunda *avatār* at the hands of the wicked are preferred and valorized. Mani Bharathi explains this point:

When *kalimāiyai* manifested itself in mere bodily forms and assumed the forms of *asuras* as Kamsa or Ravana in the past, God took mightier forms of *avatār* like Rama or Narashima to defeat the *asuras*. But when *kalimāiyai* manifested itself in subtle form as in this Yuga, God took the *avatār* of ordinary form of a common man. The *avatār* of Visnu in Kali Yuga is very different from that of other Yugas. In other Yugas, the *avatār* strikes down the evil person like Ravana, and establishes a clear victory over evil. But in Kali Yuga, *avatār* yields to Kalineecan. Vaikunda *avatār* prefers to suffer and to be defeated at the hand of the wicked. He shows a new way of overcoming evil in this Kali Yuga.²¹

This interpretation is both relevant and meaningful to the subaltern followers of AV, for the sufferings of Vaikundar resonate with the everyday trials, tribulations and multiple forms of injustice that the Cāṇārs underwent regularly in the past, and continue to experience in some places up until the present day. Thus Vaikundar not only changed the religious grammar of *avatār* itself but also demonstrated to his subaltern adherents how to translate their seeming vulnerability into self-empowerment. Vaikundar started a new campaign against the reign of *kali by* countering evil with forbearance and patience, thereby neutralizing its ill-effects.

The Strategy of Silent and Non-Violent Revolution

Vaikundar, though born as a low-caste non-vegetarian Cāṇār, became a strict vegetarian later, deliberately avoided any form of violence, and led a peaceful and all-inclusive religious movement. He is an outstanding witness to the message of non-violent transformation. Vaikunda *avatār* can be easily contrasted with the tenth *avatār* of Visnu in mainline Hinduism, namely, Kalkin. It is believed that Kalkin, a high-caste Brahmin by birth, would ride a swift horse with a sword in his hand and slay all evil people, especially the Mlecchas and other wicked people at the end of Kali Yuga. On the contrary, Vaikundasamy would wage a different kind of battle against the wicked. It is a war without arms and a battle without soldiers and generals (Bharathi 2003: 4). Vaikundar came to inaugurate a silent revolution that espouses not the might of brute and physical valor, but the power of love, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, truthfulness, and honesty. Vaikundar appealed to his followers to give up all forms of violence, including animal sacrifice and meat-eating, which was very prevalent among the Cāṇārs. AV's adherence to non-violence was underlined and praised by its present religious head Prajapathi, who said, "Our people are good, self-disciplined, non-violent and peace-loving. That is why our religious gatherings, though mammoth with two hundred thousand people, always take place without any untoward incidents with less or no police protection."²² AV also believes that if people pray to Vaikundar, he will

²¹ Interview with Mani Bharathi, August 17, 2012, Chennai.

²² Interview with Prajapathi, August 19, 2012, Swamithoppu, Kanyakumari District.

inhabit their hearts and minds and alert them to not allow the mysterious and evil force of *kalimāiyai* to enter their minds, thus enabling them to remain steadfast in their faith in God and in the practice of love and non-violence (Bharathi 2010a: 10).

The Strategy of Introduction of Religious Radicalism

Vaikundar's crusade against *kali* was soon directed against the then-prevalent forms of religious Hinduism which discriminated against vulnerable castes—eighteen of them are listed in the AT. He cleaned up the domain of religion by rejecting many of the beliefs and practices that had become corrupt and empty rituals, leading to the exploitation of the poor.

Vaikundar introduced number of prohibitions in his new religion. He banned such practices as making offerings to gods, giving or receiving stipends for religious services, offering animal sacrifices in the temples and celebration of religious festivals. (Bharathi 2003: 29). In place of these practices, Vaikundar proposed a new religious life for the AV collective. This life involved first a ritual bath and the cleansing of one's body in a sacred well (*muttirikiṇaru*) where all, irrespective of caste, bathed side by side.

Another important and unique ritual feature in AV is the wearing of headgear (i.e. tying a towel around one's head) during worship. Vaikundar made it mandatory for male followers to tie a headgear when they came to meet him, and when they went to worship in their temples. For the marginal people who had to remove their towels either from their heads, shoulders, or waists (as the case may be) at the sight of their masters and keep these items under their armpits as a mark of respect, the ritual of wearing headgear is a powerful performative act that gave them dignity and self-respect. It imparts a very powerful message that they are "kings" unto themselves and not subservient to anyone else. Commenting on the rich symbolism of this ritual, Mani Bharathi said, "To those 18 castes oppressed then by the high castes, Vaikundar said—do not be afraid. You cannot be oppressed by others. You are my creation. If you wear headgears in front of me—your creator, you will not and should not be afraid of others who are also like you—my creation. You are my children. All my children are born as kings. Hence live with self-dignity."²³

Worshipping in front of a mirror with a lamp at its side is another practice that distinguishes AV from other Hindu religious sects. This practice, which constitutes an outright rejection of the idol worship of mainline Hinduism and a positive affirmation of oneself as a potential image of God, is performed not only in AV temples but also in the households of adherents. Commenting on this rich symbolism, an informant by name Prajapathi

²³ Interview with Mani Bharathi, August 17, 2012, Chennai.

claimed, "Worshipping in front of a mirror tells you that you are in God's image and form. See God in you. Due to ignorance you find God only in the temples and give offerings. Why do you want to imprison God in the temple? You fail to make yourself a temple. God is everywhere. If you believe in this, then you will be able to see God also in other people irrespective of caste, gender and religion."²⁴ Commenting on this practice Mani Bharathi said, "Just as you have to keep the mirror clean and neat if you want to see your right image so, too, you need to keep your heart and soul pure, free of *kali*, if you want to see the image of God in you."²⁵ Thus the ritual of worship in front of a mirror is made into a distinct, history-producing, social practice (Bell 1990) that would help the subaltern Cāṇārs not only to interrogate and subvert *varnashramadharmā's* hegemonic construct of their self-identity but also to construct a new identity based on a religious philosophy. This new identity would, on the one hand, drastically alter one's idea of relationship with the divine (which is direct and unmediated), with others, and with oneself and, on the other hand, would instil in people's minds a set of socio-religious ethical outlooks that produces and sustains non-hierarchical egalitarian relations in religion and society whereby *kali* would automatically vanish.

Another important religious ritual among the AV is inter-caste dining and *aṅṅatāṅam* (free meal) which was – according to some biographers – introduced for the first time in Tamil history by Vaikundar himself. Cooking these simple meals and serving them for free to all guests irrespective of caste, class, gender, and age is an everyday affair ritualized into a religious act. After people have been served on a leaf plate, the meal starts with a question: "Ayya, can we eat?" and is followed by the answer, "You may kindly eat." This act is to ensure that everyone has been served. In an uneven society, then and now, this custom not only communicates that caring for the dispossessed and the needy is valued but also inculcates a sense of absolute equality among the human beings gathered at the table.

The Strategy of Inauguration of Universalistic Dharma

Another important mission of Vaikunda *avatār* is to recast and redefine the notion of *dharma* itself. According to Sanskritic scriptural sources, charity given to Brahmin priests is a supreme source of *dharma*. The king of Travancore who very effectively implemented this *dharma* in Vaikundar's day was praised as a *dharmakarta* (exemplar of *dharma*), since he fed hundreds of Brahmins daily at the cost of the poor, who were heavily taxed in order to support this act of *dharma*. Ayya Vaikundar called into question such discrimination and injustice by declaring, "To protect the lowly is *dharma*" (*Tālakīṭapārai tharkāpate tarmam*) (AT : 221). He also privileged

²⁴ Interview with Prajapathi, August 19, 2012, Swamithoppu, Kanyakumari District.

²⁵ Interview with Mani Bharathi, August 17, 2012, Chennai.

the low-castes over the high-castes and made them special beneficiaries of *dharma* in sharp contrast to the *varnashramadharmā* system, which contributed to the well-being of the high-castes and neglected that of the low-castes and untouchables. By introducing *annatāṇam* in AV temples, Vaikundar extended the acts of charity to low-caste people and, indeed, all people, irrespective of caste and gender.

AV's notion of *dharma* does not merely leave marginal people at the receiving end. Rather, it makes them active votaries of *dharma* and calls upon them to practice this virtue. For instance, Mani Bharathi writes in his journal, *Yuka Muḷakkam*: "*Dharma* according to AV does not necessarily mean almsgiving and doing charity. It is also possible for the ordinary people to practise *dharma* when they follow the virtues taught by Vaikundar, such as honesty, justice, truthfulness, non-violence, non-possession, absence of avarice/greed etc." (Bharathi 2009a: 19). Thus Vaikundar democratized the notion of *dharma* by broadening it to include ordinary aspects of life such as honesty, goodness, truthfulness, and non-violence,²⁶ which would become the outstanding qualities not merely of the twice-born (the men of first three *varnas* privileged to wear 'sacred thread' and perform Vedic rituals) but of all castes.

This idea of *dharma* is diametrically opposed to the teachings of *Puranās* and *Dharmasastrās* which reserved values, practices, and virtues such as austerity, truth, and the recitation of *mantrās* for Brahmins and other twice-born individuals, and excluded Śūdras. A passage from the *Mahabharata* reads: "Labour is for the *śūdra* (sic), agriculture for the *vaiśya* (sic), and punitive justice for the king. Celibacy, austerities, mantras and the truth are for the *brāhmaṇas* (sic)" (as quoted in Gonzalez-Reiman 2010: 125). As obedience to the twice-born was said to be the law of serfs (i.e., Śūdras) (van Buitenen 1975: 507), all that is expected of Śūdras is mere servitude. Any developments to the contrary in favor of Śūdras are aberrations that signal the decadent Kali Yuga. According to the *Dharmasastrās* it is during the Kali Yuga that Brahmins would behave and act like Śūdras, whereas Śūdras would recite *japās* like the Brahmins (Kane 1946: 893). But for the followers of AV, reciting incantations such as *ūkkapāṭṭu* and *uccipaṭippu*²⁷ by ordinary Cāṇārs and others is prescribed as efficacious daily practices that invoke Vaikundar's mission to end the Kali Yuga and establish the Dharma Yuga (Patrick 2003: 102). Thus, while for the *Dharmasastrās* the Sudra's imitation of Brahminical religious life is a sign of the decline of *dharma* (Kane 1946: 892-893), for AV it is clear indication of the realization of the Dharma Yuga. Vaikundar's appeal to the Cāṇārs to undertake *tuvaial*

²⁶ Interview with Prajapathi, August 19, 2012, Swamithoppu, Kanyakumari District.

²⁷ Both *ūkkapāṭṭu* (motivational song) and *uccipaṭippu* (noon-recitation) are communitarian practices in which a leader sings or reads a verse or two from AT which is repeated verbatim by others. These verses invariably highlight Vaikundar's divine attributes and his mission to annihilate Kali Yuga and to establish Dharma Yuga.

tapas (penance for self-purification) and follow strict vegetarianism as acts of physical cleansing and self-restraint to end the Kali Yuga and inaugurate the Dharma Yuga is not only a true reversal of Brahminic Kali Yuga theory but also a contestation of the Brahminic monopoly over certain religious practices and values. Since "values possess that element of power which permit dominant classes to subjugate subordinate classes with a minimum use of physical force" (Hardiman 1987: 163), it is highly strategic that Vaikundar democratized the Brahminical value of purity so that the supposedly impure Cāṇārs could effectively deprive the high-castes of their power to dominate lower-ranked people.

For Vaikundar, *dharma* is necessarily analogous to the equal treatment of human beings, irrespective of their caste, class, and gender because as children of God, all are equal. He called into question any beliefs or practices that would support hierarchy and inequality and compared such acts to the practice of taking *kāvaṭi* (carrying palanquin). "Acts such as venerating and eulogizing the dominant castes or stooping low to perform a mean action for the sake of some benefits are equivalent to the practice of palanquin [*kāvaṭi*]. They are acts of slavery. And the followers of AV should desist from such acts," writes Bharathi (2003: 80). Instead, they should live with self-respect and human dignity. Ayya told his subaltern followers, who were ill-treated by high-castes as filthy, to "Fear only God. Submit to none. No one can indeed harm you" (Bharathi 2011a). In one of his commentaries written for the *AT*, Mani Bharathi tries to situate the background of Vaikunda *avatār* as follows:

The low caste people felt so distressed and humiliated by the oppression of the high caste people that they began to wonder if they were indeed beasts but born in human form. The yoke of oppression was so grave that they thought that there was no escape from this ignominious life, a thought which made them passive, succumb to the sinister designs of domination, and lose self-respect and human dignity. It is to put an end to this suffering that Vaikundar came into this world (Bharathi 2003: 82).

Vaikundar's universal *dharma* covers not only all human beings but also the whole of cosmos: animals and plants, living and non-living entities. Vaikundar imparted good *dharma* even to the animals, birds, trees, plants, mountains and exhorted them: "Live in harmony and peace with one another. You all eat of the same grass and drink peacefully from the same water fountain. Be united in heart. Do not acquire a sense of arrogance or worthlessness because you are big or small in size and might" (Bharathi 2003: 81). Thus Vaikundar advocated a new universalistic *dharma* that included all and excluded none.

The Moment of Identification of Kali in Contemporary Times

For the followers of AV, one of the important steps in fighting *kali* is to identify its new ever-widening presence in the human realm. But it is a huge challenge to recognize its manifold sinister networks in our present world, because the invisible power of *kali* becomes ever elusive for everyone. Prajapathi, the present head of AV, compares *kali* to darkness, "All those born in the Kali *Yuga*, including Gandhi, are affected by this darkness. But Gandhi did not allow darkness to take control of him. He lit his inner light, kept it burning and defeated *kali*. But today people are hardly aware of being in the darkness."²⁸ Mani Bharathi also thinks in similar lines, "*Kali* primarily resides within the humans as an invisible force. Various vices of our present age such as falsehood, wickedness, cunningness, avarice, jealousy and retaliation are nothing but manifestations of *kali* in our midst. These invisible forms of evil power lead people to ill-treat and oppress one another."²⁹

While both Mani Bharathi and Prajapathi talked about the fundamental nature of *kali* as an intangible force of evil, Mani Bharathi's emphasis was more on its iniquitous influence on humans, whereas Prajapathi was very vocal about its manifestations in institutions and social structures. For the latter, "whatever creates lines [*koṭu*] between human beings is *kali*. Man-made institutions such as religion, nationalities and castes produce boundaries and divide people. They cause illusion [*mayakam*] but not transformation [*māram*]. And they are not true at all in the final analysis."³⁰ Among the human-made institutions, the most nefarious entity that produces and perpetuates *kali* is religion. It insists only on outward adherence to the externals such as norms and practices, but fails to touch the inner core. Prajapathi faulted caste as *kali* and exposed its links with Hinduism.

They call us Hindus. But it is Hinduism that put us out of its fold, threw us out of society and imposed untouchability on us. Ayya wanted to liberate us from this *kali* and rejected Sankritic and Brahminic Hinduism. If we go back and start to use the Sanskrit *slokas* and practice Brahminic Hindu rituals, that is against AV. AV has a philosophy of its own and is different from Hinduism.³¹

Prajapathi also indicted the people that perpetuate *kali* in the world. Among them, he first targeted the religious leaders: "They are hypocrites. Hypocrisy is the worst form of *kali*. It is a power of delusion. It masks the

²⁸ Interview with Prajapathi, August 19, 2012, Swamithoppu, Kanyakumari District.

²⁹ Interview with Mani Bharathi, August 17, 2012, Chennai.

³⁰ Interview with Prajapathi. August 19, 2012, Swamithoppu, Kanyakumari District.

³¹ Ibid.

reality and covers up falsehood."³² Similarly, he also discredited the politicians for dishonesty and lack of integrity, and dismissed the religious fundamentalists for invoking religion to advance their own vested interests and political agenda.

Greediness, consumerism, and the exploitation of nature are also blatant expressions of *kali* for Prajapathi, "Only human beings are greedy and take from nature more than what they need. Do we really require so many cars, bikes and huge buildings? In order to make them, we break mountains, destroy forests and abort nature. This is not promoting life in anyway. Hence it is *kali*."³³ Modern technology, such as computers, machines, and nuclear weapons, can become embodiments of *kali* when we use them not to protect [*kāṅka*] but to destroy [*alikka*]. For Prajapathi, "Machine is beneficial and technology is good in itself. But it has become a burden [*cumai*] not a pleasure [*cuvai*] when we use them to unsettle and destroy others etc."³⁴ But Prajapathi is also hopeful that when Dharma Yuga springs forth, human beings will use technology for good purposes.

The Moment of the Final Defeat of Kali and the Advent of the Dharma Yuga

AV believes very strongly that the role of Vaikunda *avatār* is not merely destructive but also constructive. God took this *avatār* both to destroy the Kali Yuga and to inaugurate the Dharma Yuga. The adherents of AV think that Vaikundar is certainly changing the Kali Yuga, although it cannot be predicted when the Dharma Yuga will actualize. Vaikundar has lit the lamp and the darkness is gradually disappearing. When everyone realizes this, the Kali Yuga will be over and the Dharma Yuga will bud forth.³⁵ But the Dharma Yuga will not dawn until all people come to follow the teachings of Vaikundar and the whole world reaches the ideal of one people, one race, one language and one state. In this context, Prajapathi hopes, "With the growth of information technology, AV's message will certainly be known worldwide in no time in the future. The whole world will come to accept AV one day and the Dharma Yuga will become a reality."³⁶

While for Prajapathi new inventions in science and technology are not inherently evil as they can play a significant role in the dissemination of AV's religious philosophy worldwide, for Mani Bharathi technologies will cause the degeneration of this age. For the latter, the machines and technologies are of eighteen types and subtypes and they will go on multiplying until the end of Kali Yuga. "These machines and technologies would be primarily responsible for the destruction of the world. The good

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

alone will survive this catastrophe and enter into the Dharma Yuga,"³⁷ observes Mani Bharathi.

If we analyze the views of Prajapathi and Mani Bharathi on science and technology, they seem to complement one another as they, respectively, focus on the positive and negative uses of science. While Prajapathi calls upon the followers of AV to tap the positive potential of scientific advancements for the purpose of communicating the liberative message of AV, Mani Bharathi warns humanity against the mindless and goalless proliferation of technology. However, while Prajapathi eagerly awaits the imminent eruption of the Dharma Yuga, Mani Bharathi, paradoxically, does not expect the arrival of the Dharma Yuga in the near future. On the one hand, Mani Bharathi is aware of the rapid speed with which science advances and believes that the end of Kali Yuga will be hastened by technology. But, on the other hand, he fails to see its implications in furthering the end of the Kali Yuga. For instance, Bharathi observes:

Normally, it is only after thousands of years that people recognize the power of God. Krishna was not identified as God until a few thousand years after his incarnation. But Vaikundar was perceived as God by some people when he was still alive. Within one hundred and eighty years after his death many have come to accept him as God. But it would take a couple of thousand years to bring every one under Vaikundar's rule. Although evil will steadily increase during this period, at some point the good people will not only outnumber the bad ones but also they will become bolder and confront the evil people head on and destroy them. Then the good alone will live. That is the time that the Kali Yuga, which will last for another 4,840 years, will end and the Dharma Yuga will commence.³⁸

Mani Bharathi also believes that at the end of the Kali Yuga God will destroy all "unnatural things," including human-made machines and other artefacts, and those living beings who do not qualify for the Dharma Yuga. Besides, God will resurrect all *Cāṅrōrs* (noble people), and good animals, reptiles, birds, and plants from the past. He will make the cosmic ocean wash away all impure things and cleanse the world (Bharathi 2003: 275). Next, God will make Kroni come alive and pass judgment on him (Bharathi 2003: 276). Finally, Kroni and all of his activities will be buried in Naraka and *kali* would be shut down forever in the underworld. (Bharathi 2003: 288).

Then, in the Dharma Yuga, Vaikundar will gather all good people, including the *Cāṅrōr*, and bring them all under his rule. Separations between castes

³⁷ Interview with Mani Bharathi, August 17, 2012, Chennai.

³⁸ Ibid. According to Mani Bharathi, each *yuga* is a drama staged by God. Hence the Dharma Yuga will not degenerate, rather God will end that drama and start another. Thus a new cycle will begin.

and religions, and differences between the rich and the poor will disappear. All will become one class, one race, and one people (Bharathi 2003: 298). This radical sense of equality and egalitarian utopianism is a proverbial marker of the Dharma Yuga among the followers of AV, while the same situation is a clear sign of the Kali Yuga in the *Mahabharata*³⁹ of Sanskritic Hinduism. In the Dharma Yuga the good will no longer possess their physical bodies but will instead become like God while this earth [*pūlokam*] will become heaven [*paralokam*] (Bharathi 2003: 299). Thus *kali* would disappear, once and for all, and the Dharma Yuga will last for eternity.

AV: A Subaltern Instance of the Resolution of Inner Conflict?

Vaikundar's crusade against *kali* and the strategy that he advocated for its annihilation can be easily construed as an instance of encounter of inner conflict with Hindu tradition (Heesterman 1985: 10-25). The inner conflict is fundamentally between two seemingly juxtaposed but interactive spheres operative in the Hindu religious worldview: the ultra-mundane transcendent sphere characterized by independence and represented by the Brahminic/ascetic life-model, and the mundane sphere, characterized by interdependence and represented by kingly rule. To rectify the excesses of the oppressive, mundane rule of the southern Travancore king and to reverse the extortion and exploitation of the common people caused by the elaborate system of interdependent mechanisms invented by him, Vaikundar proposed a subaltern religious mix that combined an independent, trans-mundane vision with an ascetic ethic that would restore the lost dignity of the common people and offer them hope and liberation. This vision did not subscribe to total withdrawal from the world, as Vaikundar (much like Basavanna, the founder of the Lingayats in Karnataka) "moved to and fro between withdrawal from and participation in worldly activities" (Madan 2006: 261). Indeed, Vaikundar had his own household. Among his followers, the subaltern Cāṇārs of that time, Vaikundar successfully propagated a trans-mundane world-engaging ethic and "emphasised the virtues of disciplined domesticity as against renunciation" (Madan 2006: 261). The very simple lifestyles adopted by leaders like Prajapathi, Mani Bharathi, and other adherents of AV continue the ascetic mundane life-model embodied by Ayya himself.

In confronting the then dominant temple-based Brahminic Hinduism, Vaikundar created the Janus-faced phenomenon of AV. On the one hand, to reject Brahminic idol worship, I presume that Vaikundar drew upon the reason-based Tamil ascetic Siddha tradition's denunciation of idols and rituals and considered service to humanity to be a supreme act (Zimmermann 2007: 11). But he was comfortable in displaying his religious

³⁹ For instance, Vanaparvan 3.37.188. 40 states, "The world will all be one class at the end of the Eon" (van Buitenen 1975: 595).

experience through the old “folk” forms such as possession and by acting as a medium for divination (Patrick 2003: 79, 93). Referring to Vaikundar’s mission, AV states that Vaikundar has come to cook (*camaika*) Dharma Yuga (Bharathi 2003: 4). The metaphor of “cooking” implies the creation of new from the old and the familiar. This expression perhaps best explains the mission of Vaikundar, who created a new religious phenomenon by appropriating and redefining the symbols and metaphors of mainline Hinduism. Thus, by tapping into indigenous cultural resources, he creatively combined the old and the new, and explored new avenues of producing symbolic capital for the subaltern Cāṇārs to negotiate a respectable place in society.

To liberate the subaltern Cāṇārs entrapped in the mire of exploitative, interdependent socio-religious network of degenerate Kali Yuga, Vaikundar innovated a utopian Dharma Yuga which he himself inaugurated and then left it to be carried forward by his followers with the help of *Cāṇrōr* (see Patrick 151-156). The *Cāṇrōr* in Tamil means “noble” or “wise” but in AV’s discourse the term refers to a specific religious and social category of people. In the *AT*, the word is mostly used for the Cāṇār community, which has been assigned divine parentage in AV’s mythology and has a crucial role to play in Vaikundar’s soteriological mission. By casting *Cāṇrōr* as the transformative agents of the Dharma Yuga, AV assigned an important role to the erstwhile subalterns who would serve as interface between this mundane Kali Yuga order and that of the transcendent Dharma Yuga. But in the contemporary discourse of AV, *Cāṇrōr* has increasingly acquired a religious connotation to refer to anyone who is noble and believes in the vision of AV. “*Cāṇrōr* are God’s beloved people. It includes those who are loving, kind, compassionate and grateful towards everyone, and lead their lives according to their conscience, and can distinguish the bad from the good and stay away from the bad, but show no hostility towards the bad people” (Mani Bharati 2010b: 21). Thus AV’s contemporary usage helps us to rethink the notion of *Cāṇrōr* to include all people of “nobility,” irrespective of caste, color, and creed, and thus it eschews any practice or program of discrimination and exclusion, a social crime that AV vehemently opposed in the existing *varnashramadharmā* system.

AV exploits the “futuristic outlook” of the Kali Yuga to reinvent a Hindu religious phenomenon that is sufficiently rooted in this world and yet not wholly of the world. Its ideation and practice aim at restructuring the social world into an egalitarian and universalistic domain. While Sumit Sarkar notes that nineteenth-century discourses of the Kali Yuga show how changes to the old system were resisted and repudiated as signs of degeneration (1999: 186-215), a closer look at AV’s worldview shows that it is capable of accommodating changes brought about by modernization, which no doubt cause conflict in the social realm. But AV’s philosophy beautifully offered an outlook that could comfortably accommodate the

changes taking place in Southern Travancore. While AV's reinterpretation of the Kali Yuga directly critiqued the tradition of *varnashramadharma*, which resisted change and denied "equality" to low-castes, its description of universalistic *dharma* squares well with values associated with modernity, such as equality, fraternity, etc. Further, the defining characteristics of the Dharma Yuga were easily coterminous with fundamental principles of modernity. Therefore, AV had no ideological barrier to welcoming the changes of modernity and receiving them as signs of the advent of the Dharma Yuga. However, this ideal eon does not allow people to "settle down" in modernity. Rather, by making it a reality that is not yet fully realized, AV calls upon us to await its fructification in a guarded manner with vigilant self-awareness about the presence of *kali* that resides in human hearts. AV provides a way forward for those engaged in true emancipation: it encourages them to appropriate the mundane fruits of modernity, but warns them not to become lost in them. It calls upon them to be rooted in this world yet not to lose sight of the trans-mundane Dharma Yuga. AV demythologizes the Kali Yuga so that adherents may see its concrete manifestations not merely in the systemic constraints of the *varnashramadharma* framework but also in their individual lives. Its conception of *kali* and Dharma Yuga moves away from an ossified and structured view of life which is predetermined by the *varnashramadharma* system to a more dynamic and agile set of values and practices that lay the onus on the individual's personal integrity and moral credibility, and motivates her/him toward a detached engagement with the world and its transformation towards the Dharma Yuga.

Conclusion

Despite his differences with the classical Brahminic Hindu worldview, Ayya Vaikundar's religious philosophy and teachings on the Kali Yuga did not involve a total break with Hinduism's dominant religious metaphors and narratives. Former Hindu belief systems and religious ideas were recast in a new light with the altered meanings that would bear upon the social fabric with a difference of attitudes and a transformation of dispositions that would alter contemporary social relationships, cultural behaviors, and religious perspectives, especially among the subaltern Cāṇārs. AV's religious manifesto and its trans-mundane, world-engaging ethic prescribe for all a simple lifestyle [*elīa vali*] aimed at minimizing material possessions and maximizing human contentment. Its ethical prescription – which calls for the practice of values such as love, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, truthfulness, and honesty – is a panacea for the ailment of *kali* that embodies a liberative potential for transformation both at the personal and the social levels.

By declaring a decisive battle against *kali*, which has to be decimated at all levels, Vaikundar challenges us to transform first our inner selves and then

to move on to the outer social world. It interrogates the personal and unsettles the social. But, if not for his claim to divinity, it would not have been possible for a subaltern Cāṇārs to challenge the existing systems of power. The divine status conferred upon him a supreme authority required to confront the contemporary structures of domination and exploitation in politics and religion. He became a prophetic voice not only for the subaltern Cāṇārs but for the whole of humanity ensnared in *kali* but awaiting its conclusion. Thus, the religious language spoken then by Ayya Vaikundar and reiterated now by his followers is not a mere form of religious utopia, but a more authentic or perhaps audacious articulation of a holistic emancipatory project that is inclusive of, but not limited to, the subaltern Cāṇārs.

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The Kali Yuga as 'the Wealth-Pursuit Era': Perceptions of Patronage at a Hindu Shrine

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Abstract

Reflecting India's national debate about corruption, in some instances the Kali Yuga, the present Hindu era, may be locally interpreted as an era of ambition for wealth. This study documents such a case in devotees' perceptions of patronage for Bālājī, the presiding god of the village of Sālāsar in Rajasthan. Starting around twenty years ago urban merchants known as Mārvāḍīs, who trace their ancestry to this region but who now live in cities throughout India, have publicly acclaimed Bālājī as their lineage deity. Opinions about the support provided by better-off Mārvāḍīs, considered "VIPs," divide along the lines of caste identity. In a time of pro-business governments, VIPs formally attribute their prosperity to Bālājī's protection, and have generously contributed to the development of the god's temple and pilgrimage infrastructure, which the temple's Brāhmaṇs regard as a form of gratitude to the divine. However, some other devotees and locals look askance at VIP largesse, and allege that these patrons use their money to secure privileges and tax advantages in ways that are symptomatic of our current, degraded era.

Key Words: Corruption, Hanumān, Mārvāḍī, patronage, pilgrimage

When New Money Came to Sālāsar

Over a period of several months in 2011, social activist Anna Hazare captured public attention with his ultimatums to the Indian government, including his vow to fast until death unless it passed anti-corruption legislation. Many Indians also knew that the roots of this problem go deeper than social policy, for it is a manifestation of the Kali Yuga, our present era, which according to Hindu cosmology has predestined humankind to moral degradation. I often heard this viewpoint articulated during my fieldwork that year on certain deities of shrines in the Śekhāvaṭī region of northern Rajasthan, most notably Bālājī, a local version of the monkey god Hanumān

in the village of Sālāsar.¹ Hanumān is commonly regarded as a divine refuge for humanity in these troubled times, and Bālājī locally performs the same role. As the shrine has gained popularity, it has been transformed by the influx of patronage, including donations made to gain privileges and even tax mitigation. Patronage for the shrine thus has two sides—as an instrument of faith and as an alleged symptom of greed. Although the Kali Yuga is posited in the Hindu textual tradition as an universal condition, it is interpreted in Sālāsar in line with local perceptions of patronage, because donation to the shrine and related facilities cements relationships that perpetuate social inequality between devotional groups—some pay more and get privileges in recognition of that fact, while others do not and are seemingly left out. In this article I suggest that both sides of the discourse of patronage in Sālāsar support a common local observation that the Kali Yuga is in effect “the era of pursuing wealth.”

As it so happens, starting a bit over two decades ago, a merchant caste group, the Mārvāḍīs, embraced Bālājī and several allied deities of the Śekhāvaṭī region as their hereditary lineage protectors or *kuldevs*, and have therefore become these deities' major patrons. On account of this relationship, the Mārvāḍīs are expected to maintain lifelong reverence for these deities, in return for which the deities look after this community's prosperity and wellbeing. Although Mārvāḍīs also visit other shrines, and may of course donate to them, too, no other shrines draw their personal attention like Sālāsar and a few nearby sites of Śekhāvaṭī do as the abodes of their ancestral protectors. The Mārvāḍīs, long famous within India for their mercantile aptitude, trace their ancestry to the Śekhāvaṭī region, but since colonial times they have been moving to major cities in pursuit of economic gain. Nowadays, Indians commonly regard Mārvāḍīs as quintessential financial wheeler-dealers. While most Mārvāḍī devotees simply wish to donate due to a conviction of ancestral faith, the fact that at least some within this population also take advantage of tax loopholes to preserve their wealth (not unlike some other Indians and people elsewhere) confirms local perceptions about their propensity for financial scheming.

The Indian government's formal inauguration of neoliberal reforms in 1991 involved reductions on personal and trade taxes and privileged the interests

¹ This god is distinct from the Bālājī (also a local manifestation of Hanumān) of the village of Mehndīpur, much further to the east, but still within Rajasthan. In my Ph.D. dissertation, *Gods for the Modern Era: The Rise of Miracle Shrines in Northwestern India*, I compare these two Bālājīs and the culture of devotion that assigns them different supernatural capacities. Graham Dwyer (2003), among others, has written on Mehndīpur Bālājī, and the famous exorcisms that go on near this god's shrine, but he does not mention Sālāsar Bālājī.

of the business classes, including the Mārvāḍīs. Rising prosperity among Mārvāḍīs has correlated to a windfall in donations for Bālājī's shrine, the divine wellspring of their success. This patronage has underwritten the development of facilities such as *dharmśālās*, or rest houses, and souvenir shops that have facilitated the growth of pilgrimage. And so, because it is favored by the Mārvāḍīs, and especially so by those with higher economic and political connections, Sālāsar has acquired a reputation as a place for "VIPs," as locals call devotees who receive extra favors in return for generous donations. Wherever Sālāsar is known, merely mentioning the name is likely to elicit comments about wealth, and perhaps even shady money transactions. When I told a devotee who I met at another shrine that I had been to Sālāsar, he simply exclaimed, "Gold [*sonā*]!" He was referring both to the various donated images and panels in precious metals found in the inner shrine and to the economic status of the donors themselves. Thus, Sālāsar illustrates both sides of the Kali Yuga—the flux of modern money politics and the desire to overcome it through faith in a god of miracles.

A standard Hindi dictionary tells us that the word *kali* means "strife" and *yuga* means "era," so our Kali Yuga is an era of strife (McGregor 1993: 178, 844). This era is the fourth, last, and most degraded of an eternally repeating cycle. The Kali Yuga is said to have begun with the cataclysmic war of the *Mahābhārata* epic around 5,000 years ago (Abhyankar and Ballabh 2004: 90-98). This era will continue for many more years before the world will again come to an end, after which life will return to the beginning of the *yuga* cycle, only to gradually run down once more. Corruption is merely the latest version of a litany of Kali Yuga-originated ills. And, as any Hindu devotee knows, throughout history whenever chaotic forces threaten the underlying balance of the cosmos, *avatārs* or manifestations of God appear on earth to fight them back, even as our *yuga* inexorably slides towards moral oblivion. For most devotees, Bālājī has such a role.

In Rajasthan Bālājī is not alone in being considered an *avatār* for our era: certain other deities, such as Rāmdev, Gogājī, and Khātū Śyām (a local version of Kṛṣṇa), are as well. As is the case with Bālājī, pilgrimage to the shrines of these other deities has dramatically expanded in recent decades. The material evidence for this growth at the shrines of Bālājī and Khātū Śyām—not coincidentally two of the deities particularly favored by Mārvāḍīs—is present in the many *dharmśālās*, hotels, shops, and other forms of infrastructure that have gone up within the last two decades. By contrast, Rāmdev, a god who attracts equal if not greater crowds of pilgrims from far and wide, is "for poor people," as one of my Brāhmaṇ respondents at Bālājī's temple told me. Because Ramdev's shrine does not have a reputation as a

magnet for big money like Sālāsar does, the vicinity of that shrine is still a fairly undeveloped wilderness. So, it is not enough to say only that pilgrimage shrines everywhere are growing: certain ones attract their own clientèles, which can make a significant difference, and Sālāsar is one place acknowledged to attract those with money.

Various kinds of trouble may be construed as evidence of our degraded era—domestic discord, political oppression, illness, economic competition, and so forth—and corruption is merely one facet of this. Corruption (*bhraṣṭācār*), the illicit pocketing of money for one's own benefit, often in return for dispensing favors or expedited services, comprises a range of misbehaviors at all levels of society. In Sālāsar, as at many sacred places, even without any legal impropriety, money and influence routinely obtain deference. Flashy new cars pull up close to the shrine entrance, after which policemen clear a path through the crowd for the visitors to make a quick entrance. Higher status devotees are presumed to have less time to spend waiting with the public to go into the temple. As at other shrines, the Brāhmaṇs in Sālāsar maintain advisory relationships with particular families, generally Mārvāḍīs. According to local history, as seen in the souvenir books sold in Sālāsar's market, Bālājī had decreed more than two centuries ago that the Dādhīc clan of Brāhmaṇs in this village would forever serve as his sole mediators to the public. The early history of the Brāhmaṇs' relationship with their Mārvāḍī patrons has been less clear, as both parties typically point to very recent miracles to explain the Mārvāḍīs' arrival here (notwithstanding the Mārvāḍīs' ancestry in the region).²

VIPs (typically but not exclusively Mārvāḍīs) eagerly told me of the manifold benefits that Bālājī brings to all who are faithful. Visitors from the Jāṭ farmer caste of the surrounding region—Bālājī's other main devotional clientèle—likewise provided a narrative of miracles, but often also interjected references to the inordinate privileges that Bālājī's Brāhmaṇs purportedly accord to the major donors. Among these privileges are being allowed to enter Bālājī's temple through a special shortcut to avoid having to wait in line and gaining admittance to a restricted inner spot next to the image of the god that is said to be more efficacious for obtaining miracles. A widely repeated story among Jāṭs argues that the image of Bālājī visible to the general public is a less efficacious "duplicate," while the original, more magically potent one is kept in a lower space in the shrine and reserved only

² Sālāsar's Brāhmaṇs do not keep detailed genealogical records of their VIP clients in the way that is customarily done in certain major pilgrimage centers such as Hardwar, a place with a long history. James Lochtefeld (2010: 23-42) has examined the Brāhmaṇ-client relationship in Hardwar.

for VIPs who can pay an extra price; however, the Brāhmaṇs deny this. Some locals also allege some manner of money laundering in VIP donations. This non-VIP critique is the local correlate of the broader Indian public's complaint of corruption.

Localizing the Kali Yuga

When my Brāhmaṇ respondents in Sālāsar spoke of the Kali Yuga, they often characterized it in terms of modernity. These discussions, like all of those that took place during my fieldwork, were conducted in Hindi. When talking about the Kali Yuga, the Brāhmaṇs inadvertently revealed an interesting linguistic slippage between two unrelated but similar-sounding Hindi words. That is, according to some, we live not in the Kali Yuga but in the Kal Yug (Hindi *yug* = Sanskrit *yuga*), "the era of machines," as *kal* means "machine" (McGregor 1993: 176). The similarity of these two words, *kali* and *kal*, has permitted a retroactive narrowing of the older sense of our era as an ongoing time of trouble to specifically highlight the dangers or risks of industrial modernity. This alternative reading of our era has circulated widely in India for some decades at least. The opening scene of the 1981 Hindi film *Kal Yug*, directed by Shyam Benegal, visually explores machinery in a factory, as if commenting that an ancient Hindu conception has assumed a particularly modern form. Indeed, the film's narrative updates the dynastic rivalry of the *Mahābhārata* as a conflict between modern families of industrialists (perhaps Mārvāḍīs?). In 2005, another Hindi film of the same name, this time directed by Mohit Suri, identified our modern era as characterized by urban decay—a step closer to the theme of corruption. In this second film, we are shown the underworld of Mumbai, with a focus on the pornography industry. These films illustrate that, notwithstanding the Kali Yuga's origins in classical Hindu culture, it is commonly restated in terms of markers of the present.

In the films and in conversations in Sālāsar itself, the Kali Yuga has been temporally localized, just as Hanumān, humanity's savior in this era, has been spatially localized as Bālājī. We can take this process of narrowing into the here and now a step further. As some of my Brāhmaṇ and pilgrim respondents in Sālāsar informed me, we are actually living in the Artha Yuga (sometimes stated as *ārthik yug*), "the era of wealth," or rather the pursuit of it, which includes financial corruption. This perception further narrows industrial modernity to the post-Cold War era of ascendant global capitalism and business-oriented neoliberal reform, in which the imperative to get ahead, or to acquire wealth, has become a dominant societal narrative. This assessment of our era—essentially the last twenty years—more or less

corresponds to the period of time in which Bālājī and similar Mārvāḍī-patronized deities of miracles in Śekhāvaṭī grew popular. Although Bālājī was only locally known until around twenty years ago, his fame has risen in tandem with the nationwide trend to elevate Hanumān as the preeminent god of miracles and moral vigor. But he is more than only Hanumān, for he has a separate local history in respect to Mārvāḍī patronage. Just as devotees understand the grand scope of the Kali Yuga in terms of their lived experience, expressed by some as the Artha Yuga, so too the worship of Bālājī "overdetermines" the pan-Indian scriptural Hanumān with the specialized meaning that he is a particular *kuldev* deserving of VIP-Mārvāḍī (and Jāt) patronage.

The link between Sālāsar Bālājī, the Mārvāḍīs, and the economic transformations of the last twenty years has not yet been addressed in scholarly literature. However, scholars have certainly discussed religious practice as a kind of economic undertaking. For instance, Larry Witham frames an individual's religious actions in terms of cost-benefit analysis, arguing that religion is an economic investment for receiving future benefits (Witham 2010: 4). Based on what Bālājī's devotees told me, some do indeed calculate future benefits when showing faith in him and making donations. Approaching the religion-economics relation from a more historical standpoint, Jean and John Comaroff theorize "millennial capitalism" as a mindset in which global capitalism promises religion-like salvation through economic transformation (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 292). In a sense, this model could be imagined as a Western variant of the Kali Yuga theme—capitalism as a pervasive guiding force in modern history.

Putting the religion-economics relationship in more geographically specific terms, Peter Jackson has noted the rise of "prosperity religion" in countries such as Thailand in the 1990s, where popular practices like wearing amulets for personal protection gained new clout as prescriptions for financial success in line with the zeitgeist of the "Asian Tiger" era (Jackson 1993: 247). Such studies broadly share the perspective that economic change has ramifications for religious practice. One could reasonably ask whether the worship of Bālājī has similarly grown in relation to neoliberal wealth-production, but arguing causality is not the intent of my study. Rather, I document the god's growth as a consequence of patronage in this era, and focus on how respondents' perceptions of this patronage more often reveal caste-based subjectivities (Brāhmaṇ, Mārvāḍī, and Jāt).

Bringing the economy-religion theme to the Indian context, Meera Nanda suggests that the expansion of world capitalism during the era of neoliberal

reforms since 1991, evidenced by a rising middle class, has directly impacted religious practice. As she observes, contrary to secularism theory (which holds that as people gain control over their material lives, religion lessens in importance), prosperity has actually reinforced religiosity. The resurgence of practices such as the *havan* or fire ceremony amounts to a kind of Hindu triumphalism that attributes India's rising economic stature in the setting of global capitalism to the lasting potency of its ancient culture, a perspective abetted by religion-connected political movements (Nanda 2009: 79-86). Following this argument, we could deduce that Bālājī's rise is the outcome of middle class urbanites' search for centers of authentic spiritual power, facilitated by their increasing income. In fact, more than a few pilgrims who I met at Bālājī's shrine spoke of Rajasthan as a land of devout and innocent (*bholā*) people, as opposed to Haryana, Punjab, and urban centers where the population is enmeshed in selfish ambitions of economic advancement. Still, Nanda says nothing about Hanumān or Bālājī, and does not provide indigenous categories (e.g. the Kali Yuga locally interpreted as the Artha Yuga) to explain modern history.

Alone among the scholars mentioned here, Lawrence Babb has discussed Sālāsar Bālājī, albeit only briefly within a study of the pre-modern identity formation of merchants in Rajasthan. Babb sees merchants playing a pivotal role as patrons in the evolution of local religious practices. He recounts the discovery of Bālājī's image in a field in 1754—an often-recited story in Sālāsar—and mentions merchants of that early time as devotees of the god (Babb 2004: 37-40). However, he makes no reference to Bālājī's subsequent modern history, particularly the Mārvāḍī rediscovery of the god in the late twentieth century, which falls outside the scope of his early historical study.³ Further, I have not been able to confirm his reference to merchants' experiences of miracles in Sālāsar's early days in the standard historical texts now sold in Sālāsar, leading me to wonder if he was, perhaps, reporting oral anecdotes. In any event, I do not suggest that there was no merchant patronage before recent times, but only that that connection remained low-key until two decades ago, when the Mārvāḍīs began converging on Sālāsar from afar.

As I have mentioned, a straightforward approach to understanding the recent rise of Bālājī and his culture of patronage is to link the god to the nationwide expansion of faith in Hanumān. Seemingly confirming that narrative, pilgrims from the Jāt agrarian region north of Sālāsar often said that until the last decade or two, Hanumān was relatively little worshiped,

³ I discuss the god's early and recent history as a continuous narrative in my earlier article, "When One Hanumān Is Not Another Hanumān: The Case of Sālāsar Bālājī."

and even then mostly inside the home, whereas in the years since then his shrines have become visible everywhere. With Bālājī's reputation for miracles attested by affluent Mārvāḍīs, Jāṭs have thus embraced him as the primary local representation of the monkey god. As Philip Lutgendorf has discussed, the famous *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* television serials in the late 1980s primed the nation for a resurgence of devotional sentiment regarding the epics (Lutgendorf 1995). Additionally, to many in the Indian public, Hanumān has come to symbolize resurgent Hinduism vis-à-vis the perceived threat of Muslim Pakistan (Lutgendorf 1994; 2007: 61-87). The trend towards sponsoring the construction of colossal statues of the monkey god in public places across northern India, with its implications of moral triumph, could also mesh with Nanda's notion of middle class Hindu triumphalism.

In 1992—coeval with the early days of Sālāsar Bālājī's ascendance—Hindu activists were famously agitating for the construction of a Rāma temple in Ayodhyā. Hanumān is of course renowned for his devotion to Rāma, and thereby became emblematic of the restoration of Hindu piety.⁴ In Sālāsar itself, we can see a correlate to this pan-Indian enthusiasm for the epics in the sponsorship from this time on of the non-stop reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the sacred book in which Rāma and Hanumān's exploits are recounted. Also, in very recent years a Mārvāḍī family sponsored the establishment of a Sanskrit college near Sālāsar to uphold high standards for young Brāhmaṇs. However, while these are all important background developments, it is only in examining Mārvāḍī patronage and its aftermath that the particular significance of Bālājī becomes clear.

Bālājī as a Mārvāḍī God

In discussing Mārvāḍī patronage in Sālāsar, I have been referencing 1990 as a turning point. If the Mārvāḍīs discovered Bālājī's miraculous abilities around that time, as my Brāhmaṇ respondents generally stated (although they tended to be hazy about the exact year), what deities had the Mārvāḍīs been worshiping before then? This dimension of Mārvāḍī religiosity has been little explored. In a study on the history of the Mārvāḍīs in the colonial era, Ritu Birla notes the development of nineteenth-century mercantile alliances, which, in my view, could have been the prototypes for the *maṇḍals* or

⁴ Lutgendorf (2007: 360-371) observes that Hanumān has more often been depicted in a servile role in relation to Rāma, although he is undeniably also strong and courageous, so he is not inherently an aggressive representative of Hindu nationalism. My point here is only to observe that the worship of Hanumān was clearly promoted in relation to this movement, and therefore much publicized, and so his general visibility would presumably have been locally reflected in increased reverence for Bālājī.

devotional organizations for Bālājī that have proliferated in urban Mārvāḍī communities since 1990 (Birla 2009: 74). But Birla gives little indication of any religious component in such alliances. Also looking at the era before Bālājī's fame, M. M. Juneja documents the lives of Ghanshyam Das Birla (1894-1983) and his family, famously prosperous Mārvāḍīs who originated in the Śekhāvaṭī region. They financed the construction of impressive temples in major cities across India, such as the Lakṣmīnārāyaṇ temple of Delhi (finished in 1939) (Juneja 2000: 47). Based on their caste, economic, and regional origin, the Birlās were the prototypes of the Mārvāḍīs who now come to worship Sālāsar Bālājī as their special god. Yet there is no evidence that the Birlās or other Mārvāḍīs of their time had ever heard of Bālājī, much less donated to his shrine.

Based on the Birlās' dedication of temples to Lakṣmī, the goddess of prosperity, we may suppose that she was in effect worshiped as a Mārvāḍī *kuldevī* during G. D. Birla's time. She is still very important (and not only for Mārvāḍīs), as evidenced by the fact that the Agravāl caste (one branch of the Mārvāḍīs) has in recent years collectively sponsored the construction of a splendid Lakṣmī temple as the main place of worship in Agrohā, an up-and-coming pilgrimage site north of Sālāsar. This place is significant for Mārvāḍīs, especially those who identify as Agravāls, as it is claimed to be the ancient origin-point of this caste, and the location of a kingdom that they ruled. Lakṣmī and Bālājī are theologically aligned, since Hanumān is lauded as the rescuer of Sītā, a manifestation of Lakṣmī, in the *Rāmāyāna*. But whereas the Birlā temples were constructed in major cities and were dedicated to the pan-Indian Sanskritic deities, Bālājī was the god of a small shrine in a village, and was unknown to the nation outside of a local clientèle. Apparently, then, a shift in Mārvāḍī devotional practices did indeed take place.

The formal appearance of the main image of Bālājī in Sālāsar materially satisfies the Mārvāḍī fascination with the rustic Rajasthan setting. The god's features have been painted over a coat of *sindūr* (sacred red pigment) covering a block of stone (See Figure 1). The god appears as a large, somewhat abstract face with small, rudimentary arms upraised, his lower body apparently hidden beneath the ground. A small tail has been indicated to one side. Most remarkably, he sports a whimsically curled mustache and an ample beard, in the manner of an old-time Rajput king. Interestingly, Khātū Śyām, Bālājī's local ally and fellow Mārvāḍī god, likewise sports substantial facial hair, as do certain other regional gods, such as Rāmdev. This appearance may suggest local authenticity to Mārvāḍīs from the city who wish to reclaim a Śekhāvaṭī-Rajasthan identity as their own. By contrast, the many new Hanumān shrines that the Jāṭhs have sponsored

tend to replicate generic pan-Indian versions of that god, even though the Jāts, too, revere Sālāsar Bālājī. Interestingly, Mārvāḍīs often told me that there is a taboo on replicating Sālāsar Bālājī's image, divinely punishable by terrible misfortunes, although some patrons have started to flout this prohibition and set up Bālājī temples in their home cities. No one could explain how these later patrons could be violating the rule, the fact that this perception persists suggests awareness that the image in Sālāsar is the authentic one, and represents the vital power of the ancestral land.

When I asked the Brāhmaṇs how the modern rush of outside devotees started, they told a story from around twenty-five years ago. A Śekhāvaṭī-descended Jain (a subcategory of Mārvāḍī) merchant from Kolkata, who had suffered some kind of paralysis, came to visit his ancestral home in the Sālāsar area. Having already unsuccessfully sought treatment in the United States, he entreated Bālājī for assistance.⁵ He was healed within three weeks after having Bālājī's *darśan* (divine audience), which sparked a surge of interest among other Mārvāḍī merchants. This early miracle was not about prosperity but rather health. Notwithstanding Sālāsar's reputation as a place for the wealthy, the god's ability to cure devotees of physical ailments has all along been his most frequently cited attribute. Indeed, describing the god in terms of miraculous healing politely masks the underlying caste-class divide, which becomes apparent when the subject of wealth production comes up. For that matter, Sālāsar's Brāhmaṇs, their Mārvāḍī patrons, and Jāt devotees acknowledge that socioeconomic factors are responsible for the rise of

⁵ The devotees that I encountered at Sālāsar and numerous other shrines, and in religious events, in northwestern India frequently prefaced stories of healing from Bālājī or similar gods with accounts of failed attempts with Western-style doctors, or even going abroad (as in the case described here). The implication was that modern doctors are often useless, whereas Bālājī, the native god, never fails.



Figure 1. Bālājī, Sālāsar Temple. Photograph provided by a Brāhmaṇ from the temple.
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pilgrimage here, so it is not simply a story of miracles. In explaining the god's rising fame, devotees cited improved roads and the availability of transportation, the promotion of Bālājī on religious-themed television channels, increased wealth for leisure activities, and, as mentioned earlier, a general rise in devotion to Hanumān.

Soon after the miraculous experience of the Jain merchant from Kolkata with Bālājī, an expatriate Mārvāḍī businessman living in Hong Kong saw his

company expand steadily after paying a visit to Bālājī. In recognition of this blessing, he adopted a pious lifestyle of reciting popular scriptures such as *Sundarkāṇḍ* and *Hanumān cālīsā*.⁶ As a result of his prosperity from devotion to Bālājī, this businessman became a major donor, and he has even built a luxury hotel in town catering to VIPs like himself. His story suggests that mercantile success hinges on properly remembering one's lineage deity in the homeland. The story of the Hong Kong businessman provides a template of Mārvāḍī piety: once one affirms faith in Bālājī, he becomes a morally upright devotee and makes donations for the improvement of Sālāsar. According to Sālāsar's Brāhmaṇs, many businessmen now regularly donate "two to four percent" of their profits to the temple in gratitude, which has enabled the temple trust to continuously upgrade facilities for pilgrims. By around 1994, some VIP patrons had started putting up dated plaques publicly announcing donations in Bālājī's temple and around Sālāsar. These plaques virtually always specify Mārvāḍī donors with such surnames as Agravāl, Mittal, Jindal, Bānsal, Dālmīyā, and so forth. Some of these plaques refer to donations made for public works, such as fountains or the town's *gauśālā* (cow sanctuary), which is said to be the largest in Rajasthan. Most splendid among these benefactions are the many silver reliefs of divine subjects affixed to the wall in Bālājī's temple, and along the *parikramā* (circumambulatory) hall. This visible record of Mārvāḍī donations in effect broadcasts Bālājī's efficacy to the public, and signals that the Mārvāḍīs have established a special relationship with him.

According to the Jāṭs, in the early days of Bālājī's modern popularity the shrine predominantly attracted Mārvāḍīs. It seems that by the mid-to-late 1990s the Jāṭs from the surrounding region were coming in increasing numbers, especially on foot, spurred by the miracles that Mārvāḍīs and others had experienced. The rise of Jāṭ pilgrimage did not simply blend into the Mārvāḍī devotional presence. The Mārvāḍīs frequently arrive by vehicle (from distant cities) and keep to themselves at Sālāsar, while the Jāṭs often walk (since they live closer), and typically travel in large groups from their home areas. The two groups also favor different holidays in Sālāsar. Victor Turner's well-known theory of *communitas*—the sense of community that pilgrims of diverse backgrounds purportedly experience while sharing the road to religious shrines—seems not to hold true here (Turner 1978: 250-

⁶ Both of these Hindi texts are popularly attributed to the renowned sixteenth-century poet Tulsidās. *Sundarkāṇḍ* is a chapter extolling Hanumān's exploits in service of the god Rāma, taken from Tulsidās' *Rāmcaritmānas*. *Hānuman cālīsā* is a standalone short poetic work similarly praising Hanumān. My respondents, like many across northern India, regard these two works as the apex of divinely efficacious texts, to be recited as needed to maintain wellbeing.

255). A closer model would be the caste-segregated mass pilgrimage in Maharashtra that Iravati Karve observes (Karve 1962: 13-29). Such caste divisions hint at the fact that neoliberal reforms have had uneven local effects. As Atul Kohli observes, the chief beneficiaries of the Indian government's economic reforms were the business classes—including the VIPs who embraced Bālājī—while others experienced no significant economic uplift (Kohli 2012: 19-78).

Remaking the Mārvāḍīs

The rise of patronage in Sālāsar corresponds to the emergence of a new Mārvāḍī devotional culture in cities across India. The first urban *maṇḍal* for Bālājī in the Mumbai area was established in 1990, not long before we start to see dated, publicly visible donations in Sālāsar. It is not impossible that donations to Sālāsar were made before that time, but there appears to have been a new interest at that point in publicly recording these acts for posterity, just as Mārvāḍīs started hosting *jāgrans*—increasingly grand, ostentatious public singing performances—as an integral social dimension of Bālājī's worship. As I was often told, these events have gotten larger over the years as a consequence of the rising prosperity that the god has brought. I visited numerous urban *maṇḍals* and received calendars and souvenir books from them that usually state when these groups were founded. Based on this evidence, in conjunction with the testimony of *maṇḍal* members and Sālāsar's Brāhmaṇs, 1990 should be understood as a significant date. Devotees have continued to form new *maṇḍals* up to the present day: in Bangalore, for example, the first Sālāsar Bālājī *maṇḍal*, which is exclusively patronized by Mārvāḍīs, was started as recently as 2009. The important point that I glean from this chronology is that devotion to Bālājī is less the outcome of a continuous tradition than the recent relocation of urban piety into the rural Rajasthani homeland. In tandem with this devotional change, we can say that the financial practices of urban Mārvāḍīs entered into the local scene of Bālājī as they brought their faith to this deity.

In their urban milieu, the Mārvāḍīs nowadays cherish a reconstituted Rajasthani identity, which is supported by their worship of Bālājī as a god of their ancestral land. Mārvāḍī pilgrims tell stories of having earlier been somewhat ignorant about Bālājī, on account of having grown up so far away. Then, the story goes, they discovered his efficacy as the lord of their homeland, became lifelong devotees, and began making frequent visits to his temple in Rajasthan and giving grateful donations. To mention only a very brief example, I met a Mārvāḍī man at the Sālāsar temple whose family had moved fifty years ago from Śekhāvaṭī to the city of Nanded in eastern

Maharashtra. Although he lived far from Rajasthan, he had grown up within a Śekhāvaṭī-descended community of merchants, along with Jains, and even some Jāṭs. He had perhaps been aware of Bālājī's special abilities, although he still did not regularly go to Sālāsar. He later became a factory owner, but one day the whole place burned down. The only thing that survived the fire was a framed picture of bearded Sālāsar Bālājī. The man realized in that moment that not only was Bālājī a supremely powerful being but also that this god was the *kuldev* who would henceforth look after him. So, he started to worship Bālājī with more intensity, and now comes to Sālāsar three times a year, which he reports has led to renewed prosperity. The important theme here is that the discovery of Bālājī goes hand in hand with a renewal of one's connection with the ancestral land.

As devotees of Bālājī, Mārvāḍīs regularly come together in their urban setting to sing religious hymns (*bhajans*) and occasionally put on *jāgrans* for the public. We can see a parallel to this latter-day urban embrace of Bālājī in the case of Rani Sati, a goddess from Bālājī's region who has similarly become popular among Mārvāḍīs in recent years. In the final chapter of a study of Mārvāḍīs in Kolkata, Anne Hardgrove (2004) depicts Rani Sati as a goddess who was newly discovered in recent years rather than being a carryover from some ancient system of Mārvāḍī worship. In documenting a commemorative celebration of the 300th anniversary of Rani Sati's shrine in Rajasthan, Hardgrove notes that the Mārvāḍīs kept the events at the shrine within their caste-based social network, while leaving out locals (Hardgrove 2004: 250-255). This anecdote matches my observation of the largely caste-segregated devotional lives of Mārvāḍīs and Jāṭs in Sālāsar. When it comes to the discourse of patronage and corruption in Sālāsar, it becomes clear that an undercurrent of caste subjectivity determines whether an act of benefaction is counted as esteemed devotion (the Mārvāḍī-VIP and Brāhmaṇ perspective) or a matter of buying privileges (the non-VIP / non-Brāhmaṇ perspective).

One could make a case that the Mārvāḍī (re-?) discovery of ancestral deities is in line with a broader societal turn towards revising caste histories in more uplifting terms, perhaps in tandem with nationwide narratives of socioeconomic progress. It was evident in my visits to various urban *maṇḍals* that the Mārvāḍīs tend to stay apart from the surrounding population. They conduct business largely with other Mārvāḍīs, and their devotional events are promoted within, and attended only by, the Mārvāḍī community. In most cases, the Mārvāḍīs have been living in their adopted cities for decades, if not from birth, and they generally confirm that they have limited facility with the state language and instead speak Hindi or a Mārvāḍī dialect. This outcome is not surprising, insofar as they may often work with others of the

same background in their livelihoods. For instance, many members of Bangalore's Bālājī *maṇḍal* are involved in cloth businesses, and hire newcomers from Rajasthan as their assistants because, they said, they trust Rajasthanis more. From what I could see, the Mārvāḍīs of Bangalore do not much, if at all, go to Karnatakan temples, including those for Hanumān. The Bangalore Mārvāḍīs have not yet established a Bālājī temple. So, in this situation—living amidst a culturally different population—it is plausible that Mārvāḍīs would find some comfort in Sālāsar as a distant lodestar of morality and social identity.

Inasmuch as Mārvāḍī religious practice produces social difference (as Mārvāḍī-sponsored events foreground Mārvāḍī society), one could argue that the worship of Bālājī is constitutive of Mārvāḍī identity. For most urban Mārvāḍīs, participation in events for Bālājī is an obligatory aspect of belonging to their community. At *jāgras*, they meet friends, relatives, and business partners, and, as I witnessed, pass out awards to those who have done meritorious public work. Thus, I suggest, the worship of Bālājī not only advances personal ambitions through miracles but also, from a "functional" standpoint, promotes the interests of the community as a whole. Consider, by comparison, Lutgendorf's theory that the recent popularity of super-powerful Hanumān relates to societal perceptions of "a loss of manliness" due to the negative effects of the Kali Yuga (Lutgendorf 2007: 363). Indeed, although expressed in different terms, this is in effect what devotees often told me—people increasingly come to Bālājī in proportion to their conviction that our era is sinking into immorality. The worship of Bālājī builds on a narrative of recovery from the ills of the world that might find a parallel in Western New Age iterations of "twelve-step" programs for addiction recovery.

While generally in agreement with Lutgendorf's concept of caste uplift, I theorize this uplift not so much as a form of opposition to an imagined Muslim threat (Lutgendorf 2007; 61-87) but more as a public performance in recognition of socioeconomic success, or aspirations to that end. Thus, Mārvāḍīs, upwardly mobile but not really integrated in their adopted cities, claim past glory to match their rising economic situation. In this sense, patronage is not simply piety, nor merely an act of buying privileges (as some non-Brāhmaṇ locals in Sālāsar would say). Rather, it is a public statement. The case of Agrohā, the site of an ancient settlement in northern Rajasthan, offers us a further piece of evidence. Within a few decades, Mārvāḍīs have become convinced that the brick foundations, scattered coins, and other archaeological findings there are from the remains of an Agravāl-Mārvāḍī kingdom that dates back thousands of years. As Mārvāḍī devotees told me, the ancient Agravāls had been a *kṣatriya* or kingly (warrior) caste,

but when the kingdom fell apart they necessarily changed their livelihood and so became a merchant caste. Thus, the Mārvāḍīs have recast their community from the image of the miserly moneylender that predominates in popular culture to that of the ancient warrior. Hindi books sold to visitors at the site shape history to support this caste narrative. One such text, Svarājyamaṇi Agravāl's *Agrasen agrohā agravāl* (2006), praises the Mārvāḍīs for having heroically donated to the Indian independence struggle and notes that they have been unfairly maligned in Indian society and should now be given their deserved level of respect.⁷

Miracles of Money

In this final section, I describe how new money from VIP patronage has materially transformed Sālāsar, which provides the empirical basis for the local observation that the Kali Yuga is also the Artha Yuga. I will first focus on how business is done in the pilgrimage industry. Members of the Dādhīc Brāhmaṇ clan, who run the temple, are also proprietors of the pilgrim-oriented shops clustered nearby. The land in the vicinity of the temple officially belongs to Bālājī, and the Dādhīc shopkeepers rent spaces for minuscule rates that had been fixed before the influx of pilgrimage inflated the value of local land. If one of the hereditary Brāhmaṇ shopkeepers were now to sell the rental rights to his shop space near the temple, the new renter would be expected to pay the departing shopkeeper 15,000 rupees (around \$330 at the time of research) for the right to occupy that space.⁸ Locals informed me that purchasing a space near the temple outright costs 10,000 rupees per square foot, supposedly surpassing the rate of 4,000 rupees per square foot that is the norm for farmland sold for industrial development in Gurgaon District, adjacent to Delhi. Locals ascribe the fantastic rise in Sālāsar's real estate value, and the pilgrimage industry that employs them, to the protection of Bālājī, their divine ruler. Local Brāhmaṇs say with satisfaction that all this land speculation under Bālājī's watch has made Sālāsar "the most expensive site in India," outranking even Mumbai!

⁷ There is a parallel to Mārvāḍī caste uplift in the socioeconomic progress of the Jāṭ caste. In recent decades, the Jāṭs of the agricultural region north of Sālāsar have become firm devotees of Hanumān, whose primary local representation is Bālājī. Jāṭs commented that technological progress in their agricultural work, particularly the acquisition of tractors, has made their lives easier and given them the means to transport provisions in support of villagers who walk in large groups in pilgrimage to Sālāsar. Like the Mārvāḍīs, they comment that material progress is due to faith in Bālājī-Hanumān. For both Mārvāḍīs and Jāṭs, constituting a caste as a blessed community involves performing devotion in publicly visible ways (such as Mārvāḍī donations to Bālājī's temple, or large-scale Jāṭ foot pilgrimage), which publicly announce their sincere faith.

⁸ At the time of research, \$1 US traded for approximately 45 rupees.

Hence, the local reception to the Artha Yuga (that is, the arrival of outside money) is mixed; it has brought an income to this village, but at the same time some feel uneasy about the fact that money has so much influence in society these days.

Even on the periphery of town, real estate speculation on new homes and condominiums has pushed up land prices. Some of the more affluent pilgrims visit Bālājī from far-off cities as often as once a month, which has spurred a market for permanent accommodations in an otherwise remote area. I noticed signs posted in front of empty fields promising upcoming luxury flats in the god's name. One sign for a housing development advertised: "*Bālājī kī Dhānī*" ("Bālājī's Village"): Ethnic Luxury Villas & Plots with all Facilities at Sālāsar Bālājī ... 400 meters [ahead] ...," while another promised: "Bālājī Village: Plots, Flats and Villas COMING SOON!" Both signs included a depiction of bearded Bālājī. The sign's mention of "ethnic" residences suggests the desirability of a Rajasthani aesthetic to Mārvāḍīs from the big city. Even so, these are promised as luxurious residences, suited to a moneyed clientèle.

A similar trajectory of patronage and affluence has been seen at the handful of other Mārvāḍī-favored pilgrimage shrines in Śekhāvaṭī. For instance, news of the Mārvāḍī enthusiasm for Khāṭū Śyām as a god of miracles has gradually spread to other caste groups in the surrounding region, inasmuch as Mārvāḍī prosperity makes a convincing testimony of the god's efficacy. As with Sālāsar, coming to Khāṭū Śyām has become not just a performance of faith in the god's ability to answer's one's prayers but also a public statement that one has joined the blessed ranks of the upwardly mobile. As a Brāhmaṇ schoolteacher in Khāṭū Śyām told me, "Ten years ago, just rich people [Mārvāḍīs] came here, but now everyone's getting rich, so they all come!"⁹ This performance of gratitude for prosperity, and ongoing acts of faith to ensure continued good fortune, is especially on display during Khāṭū Śyām's grandest annual festival (at the time of the nationwide Hindu festival known as Holī), when Mārvāḍīs from around India arrive and sponsor sumptuous *jāgrans* attended by their urban peers.

The village of Khāṭū Śyām has its own Bālājī shrines, too, which have benefited from VIP patronage. According to a priest at one such shrine, it had initially consisted of no more than a Hanumān image set under a tree, but around twenty years ago a merchant prayed there and gave a small

⁹ "Das sāl pehle sirf amīr log ā rahe the, lekin ājkal har ādmī 'rich person' honge, is lie sab āte haiñ."

donation, after which "he got completely wealthy from Bālājī!"¹⁰ While this priest acknowledged that success "depends on faith [*viśvās*]," he also suggested to me that prayer necessarily involves a calculation of the relative gain involved in making a donation versus the expected benefit that one will get in return: "If you give some money to God, then he will increase your wealth."¹¹ This priest also seemed a bit cynical about the practice of calculating benefits in devotion: "As long as the temple can produce miracles, there will be faith in heaven ... If [pilgrims] couldn't get any miracles, then why should they come?!"¹² This statement sums up the pragmatic view of devotion at Khātū Śyām and Sālāsar: the deity needs to consistently produce desired results to justify his popularity.

The construction of numerous *dharmśālās* has been the most obvious material result of new money in both Sālāsar and Khātū Śyām. Brāhmaṇs and pilgrims in Sālāsar told me that prior to twenty to twenty-five years ago there were perhaps two *dharmśālās* at each site, whereas now they have multiplied to dozens. The few pilgrims who arrived in the early days might just sleep in the desert scrub. Donations for the construction and maintenance of *dharmśālās* are of course a way of showing faith, but some locals refer to these establishments as money-laundering vehicles for "number-two money," which is a euphemism for so-called "black" money, or income that is hidden from taxation.¹³ The "black economy" had been around long before the ascent of Bālājī, and in the early years of neoliberal reforms, when the government lowered taxes, it had hoped that this would remove the incentive to conceal income. Instead, this culture of tax avoidance became even more entrenched: it is estimated that the "black" economy actually increased from 30 percent to 40 percent of the total economy between 1991 and 1995 (Kumar 1999: 55-72). Apparently, as income rose, so, too, did the desire to shield it from taxation.

The rhetoric of patronage is more often than not repackaged as divine will. Devotees commonly state that when or whether they come from their home areas to Sālāsar is a matter of divine calling (*bhagvān bulāyā*). Thus, in the wealth-pursuing era, when avoiding taxes is supposedly so common, this may become the focus of requests for divine intervention. As a Brāhmaṇ

¹⁰ "Bālājī se khūb dhān milā."

¹¹ "Āp bhagvān ko dān deṅge to voh āp kā dhān baḍegā."

¹² "Jab tak camatkār maṅdir se nahīn hotā hai, svarg par viśvās nahīn hotā hai ... Camatkār na milā hai to log āte kyōn hai?"

¹³ The English term is directly used in Hindi. The opposite term, "number-one money," therefore means income that is honestly reported. I think that the use of "two" for this term conveys the adjectival Hindi word *dūsrā*, which means both "second" and "other." Thus, "number two money" conveys the sense of "the other kind of income," which is not reported.

from a town near Sālāsar told me, during the last decade the tax bureau was harassing a well-to-do Mārvāḍī industrialist on suspicion of keeping “number-two money,” so he sought Bālājī’s help. This man walked more than a hundred kilometers from his ancestral home elsewhere in Śekhāvaṭī to Sālāsar to pray to the god. In response, Bālājī came to him in a dream and said that if he built a new temple for Bālājī the man’s number-two money troubles would disappear. The man subsequently built a very splendid temple, which rivals even the famous Birla temples in its elegance, on the road to Sālāsar. It has since become popular as a rest stop for pilgrims. This temple, which I visited multiple times, has acquired its own reputation for miracles of healing and wealth production. The patron of this temple has also established a luxury *dharmśālā* there and markets religious souvenirs and snacks to passing pilgrims.

Because donations to religious establishments are legally tax-free, this practice is widely suspected to be a loophole for reducing tax liability. Villagers who are employed as caretakers and guards at the *dharmśālās* in Sālāsar matter-of-factly speak of these establishments as projects for sheltering money. It is important to keep in mind that avoiding taxes is legal, whereas evading taxes is not. I was not able to determine the relative incidence of such phenomena, if at all, in the building of *dharmśālās*, but it is clear from the “number two” terminology that locals believe that the patronage of at least some of these institutions involves accounting manipulations. Further, newspapers have reported that benefactors have been arrested for tax evasion, so tax avoidance and evasion may overlap. This could have been the case, for example, with a major industrialist who had generously donated for the construction of a luxurious *dharmśālā* in Sālāsar. His name and the company he owned were listed on a donation plaque. It was reported in the news four years later that this company was raided on the suspicion that the owner had been concealing wealth from taxation. I think it is worth considering, then, whether the apparent expansion of devotion and patronage at Sālāsar and certain other rural shrines (such as Khāṭū Śyām and Rani Sati) might have also provided an opportunity for tax mitigation for high-placed industrialists and financiers from the 1990s on, as evidenced in publicly visible announcements of pious donations.

Conclusion

This article has examined devotees’ perceptions of patronage in the worship of Sālāsar Bālājī. I have argued that these viewpoints are informed by the knowledge that we live in the Kali Yuga, an era of degradation. On the one

hand, donations can be a sign of faith in the face of the ills of our era, but they can also be a method for gaining extra privileges, which implies a symptom of those ills. In discussing these two sides of patronage as a local phenomenon, I have advanced three key observations. First, one local meaning ascribed to the Kali Yuga in Sālāsar is that it is the Artha Yuga or era of wealth-pursuit; this viewpoint imprints the local observation that many wealthy devotees come here. Second, the broader societal discourse of corruption becomes locally meaningful in anecdotes about how money is used in the worship of Bālājī. Third, Hanumān himself, a deity of pan-Indian renown, is overlaid with local meanings associated with Bālājī. The god of Sālāsar is both a universal savior (like Hanumān) and the guardian of the Mārvāḍīs originating in this region, and more recently of many Jāṭs. This study has looked at the confluence of these three kinds of localization. While the Brāhmaṇs and Mārvāḍīs generally speak of patronage as gratitude for the god's miracles, those (such as Jāṭs) who feel left out of the Brāhmaṇ-Mārvāḍī (or VIP) relationship may see such benefactions as ploys for individual financial gain, even though they themselves sponsor the construction of Hanumān shrines in their own villages. An implication of this study, then, is that caste-related social networks underlying relations of patronage remain vital in contemporary life (at least in northwestern India), and also that these associations are critical factors driving recent religious change, such as the discovery and rise of Bālājī.

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