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Cover Page Footnote

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The Dark Selfish Thief: The Image of Vishnu in Social Justice

Movements

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Abstract

Whether we identify ourselves or our societies as being secular or religious, it cannot be denied that from the simplest forms of speech to pressing ethical concerns, numerous aspects of our daily lives and our very selves are influenced by religion. Radical religious tendencies point to overwhelmingly negative events throughout the course of history and the establishment of social norms which are questioned by society today; however, religion can be just as much a uniting phenomenon that calls for the questioning of these arbitrary norms and pushes for liberation. This project builds on the use of religious images— particularly the image of Vishnu, a popular Hindu deity— to speak to contemporary concerns of social justice, such as colorism, casteism, and gender inequality. How might a careful and sensitive reinterpretation of the image and stories of Vishnu be made to speak to modern social issues in India? This paper gathers traditional myths of Vishnu and seeks to construct the identity of the divine as an omni-joyous entity that delights in plurality and liberates through diverse embodiment. By taking on various identities through his various incarnations, Vishnu represents the immanence, transcendence, and fluidity of an all-embracing divine with regard to labels of skin color, caste, and gender.

Keywords: Theology/Religion, Liberation Theology, Hinduism, Women's/Gender Studies, Cultural Studies

Introduction

We cannot deny that as members of society, we are influenced by the religious narratives around us, which are no less capable of producing social constructions of reality than narratives spanning culture, history, or politics. To cite an example for Christianity, certain interpretations of biblical stories in the past justified the need for the “civilized” European powers to “save,” i.e., enslave foreign peoples, who have been “corrupted by Satan.” In response, other Christian narratives stemming from the same or similar collection of stories identified the divine as a liberator and protested against slavery, striving to liberate enslaved natives throughout the world. Two different realities were presented by a common collection of narratives and had varying social implications in the environment of their historical contexts. Such diversity is present within all religions, and Hinduism within an Indian context is no exception.

India, also referred to as Bhārat (“big, vast, diverse”) by its inhabitants, is by no means a homogenous country. Having embraced pluralism for most of its history, it is home to thousands of tribes, ethnic groups or *jatis*, and a wide range of races and religious groups, some indigenous, some which have migrated into the subcontinent, and some introduced through globalization. Though an overwhelming majority of the population claims ancestry with either Indo-Iranian (Aryan) or Dravidian predecessors, synthesis of groups, intermarriage among members of different tribes, and contact with cultures of invading groups over several millennia have created new identities and further diversified the demographics. Similar to its land of origin, Hinduism, too, is demographically colorful and is one of the oldest and most diverse religions in the world. What Western scholarship labels as “Hinduism” (Soherwordi 204), referred to as Sanatana Dharma, the “eternal religion” by its adherents, actually encapsulates many different dharmas

belonging to a variety of social groups. It is an amalgamation of various religions, doctrines, critiques, schools of philosophy, and theistic and nontheistic traditions which have evolved in the subcontinent over time. In the words of Elaine M. Fisher, Hindu pluralism is inherent in its “conceptual and institutional approach to internal diversity that cannot be reduced to a singular axis of hegemony” (Fisher 193). The concepts and institutions of “Hinduism” are not consistent and cannot be traced to a single interpretation or system of dogmatics given their diverse origins and further-diversified practices.

It appears near impossible to homogenize a “religion” or a nation that is bound to contain radically different collections of stories, sacred histories, and constructions of reality in one geographic region, and it is easy to imagine the difficulty of a vastly multicultural country like India, which positions itself as a secular democracy, to accommodate people belonging to different races, classes, sects, and sexual orientations. It is not always the case that self-acceptance and pluralism will prevail, however; right-wing Hindus argue that religious universalism has caused the loss of many of Hinduism's rich traditions (Long 60). This is further supported by particular historical contexts of India's past displaying varying degrees of oppression of Hindus by Mughal and later British invaders. Generations of conservative Hindus seek to position themselves against Western influence and voice a need to unite Hindus in a way that seemingly takes away from the religion's innate diversity. Ironically, it displays how India is still under Western influence, for these right-wing groups are spiraling their way into warped conceptions of Western monotheism and are facing the need to create a specific agenda for a religion— and a nation— that has been multiplex as a whole and rather freeform in its beliefs for many centuries. One of the consequences of this is the puritanical conservatism of the imperialist

powers, which exacerbated the discrimination of dark-skinned and lower caste individuals and suppressed Hinduism's rich resources of sexual liberties and identities (Doniger 51).

Hinduism, like all religions, is by no means static and heavily relies on historical context. However, given the diversity of interpretations, it can be argued that religion is a uniting phenomenon that preserves variety, calls for the questioning of arbitrary social norms, and pushes for social liberation. Indian activist Mohandas Gandhi utilized his religious beliefs to give rise to his successful Satyagraha Campaign during the Indian independence movement; my work builds on a similar attempt to use religious reinterpretations to speak to contemporary concerns of social justice in India. In this work, I grapple with the following key questions: How might a careful and sensitive reinterpretation of the stories of Vishnu, gathered from core Hindu resources such as the Vedas and Upanishads and predominantly Vaishnava (Vishnu-venerating) oral traditions and texts (e.g. the Bhagavata Purana), be made to speak to modern social issues? What prospects might there be for such a reinterpretation in the public sphere? By gathering myths— by which I mean traditional stories which provide gateways into the world view of the culture— commonly attributed to the popular Hindu god Vishnu and his many incarnations, I seek to construct the identity of the divine as an omni-joyous entity that liberates through creative embodiment. The cosmic body of Vishnu seeks joy in all forms of embodiment and is redemptive in light of social justice, serving as a symbol of plurality and positive self-affirmation. In taking on various identities, Vishnu represents an all-embracing divine with regard to labels of skin color, caste, and gender.

I will address different aspects of Vishnu's "body" that are relevant for different social issues via two main sections. The first section of this work will address *varna*, "characteristics," which encompass color and caste in Hindu ideology. I will focus on Vishnu's skin color in

traditional iconography and devotional literature to disprove colorist and racist attitudes. In order to refute casteist perspectives, I will expand on the *avatara* doctrine, which points to Vishnu's incarnations within varying, sometimes paradoxical social classes and contexts for the restoration of justice. The second section of this work will elaborate on *prakriti*, "nature," which refers to gender, sexual nature or preference. By drawing on Vishnu's female incarnations and non-binary roles in gender fluidity myths, I will explore the "true" gender of Vishnu vis-à-vis his nature as a life-affirming, seductive trickster deity; the objective of these analyses is to refute androcentric and heterocentric worldviews.

The World as Vishnu's Body: Nondual Diversity of the Cosmos

Upon hearing from the cowherd boys of Vrindavan that her young son had eaten dirt, an anxious Yashoda chides her toddler. "Lies," he says, fervently shaking his head. "They are all lying. I did not eat dirt!" But Yashoda is persistent and demands to see for herself. "If you are telling the truth, open your mouth wide, Krishna," (Bhagavata Purana 10.8.36). When the boy caves in and opens his tiny mouth, Yashoda sees not just dirt but the entire cosmic system at play (Bhagavata Purana 10.8.37). She sees all moving and nonmoving forces, all sentient and non-sentient beings, mountains, islands, oceans, the earth, moon, sun and stars, planetary systems, all the elements caught in the act of sustaining all that is created. She sees the senses, the mind, sense perception, the many desires and lifetimes of various souls, all the works of karma in the world. She sees their little village in Vrindavan, the grazing cattle and the lush pastures, the tattle-taling cowherd boys huddled around her, and she sees herself looking into Krishna's mouth and seeing the universe (Bhagavata Purana 10.8.39).

Yashoda is caught simultaneously by fear and awe. She is convinced that the entity standing before her is not her son but Vishnu, the "all-pervading one," the impersonal cosmic

force, *Brahman*, that permeates through every atom and continuously expands and encapsulates the universe. In light of this realization, Yashoda understands the cosmic system to be the body of Vishnu, and she is seized by divine ecstasy, all set for reaching *moksha*, or liberation. A blink later, however, she is ensnared by the entity's illusive power, and as she comes down from her spiritual high, the many mountains and planets turn into globs of soil sticking to baby teeth. Standing before her is no more than a dark little toddler, his muddy hands behind his back, a sheepish smile to his lips, and she wonders if she has gone mad (Bhagavata Purana 10.8.40).

This is certainly not the first time Vishnu's popular incarnation, Krishna, displays powerful images of his cosmic identity in Vaishnava Hindu texts. In the Bhagavad Gita, he reveals his *visvaroopā* (universal form) to his friend and disciple, Arjuna, in the midst of the Kurukshetra battlefield. The universal entity possessed a "wondrous" form with "unlimited mouths and unlimited eyes," a body decorated with "dazzling ornaments, numerous garbs, many different scents," and a glow that surpasses the resemblance of "a thousand suns rising in the sky at once" (Bhagavad Gita 11:9-11:13). While seemingly bizarre for those who are repulsed by idolatry, stories like these are not merely fantastical and unrestrained in imagination; they are characterized by themes of multiplicity and simultaneous oneness of the cosmos that Hindu theologians try to capture. Despite taking on many identities, the sum of Vishnu's forms is paradoxical and does not take away from his transcendence and fluidity despite the seemingly apparent "limitations" of embodiment and anthropocentric descriptions. It is a different kind of oneness from what is emphasized by pure mind-body dualism, which tends to establish separate spiritual and material planes on a more radical level, for in many Hindu narratives, the sacred fully participates in the world of the profane.

Recognizing this intimate ontological closeness of Vishnu and the world through the lens of nondualism is crucial for understanding resources in the tradition which support a theology of liberation. The world as the cosmic body of the divine represents nonduality that questions dichotomies and categorizations, straddling the simultaneous existence of plurality and nonplurality in the oneness of all that exists. Simultaneously, the cosmic body is to be cherished in its diversity, fluid identity, and multiplicity, particularly in the sectors of race, social class, sex and gender. Vishnu as an embodied divine affirms and encourages body positivity and creativity, particularly with the aim of restoring justice. “Whenever there is a decline in righteousness and an increase in unrighteousness, O Arjuna, at that time I manifest myself on earth. To protect the righteous, to annihilate the wicked, and to reestablish the principles of dharma [righteousness], I manifest on this earth age after age” (Bhagavad Gita 4:7-4:8). This verse speaks to a number of Hindus to this day, reminding them of Vishnu’s promise to take on numerous manifestations (i.e., embodiments) at different points in history for the sake of liberating the afflicted.

Varna (“Characteristics”): Skin Color and Social Class

With the European colonization of the Indian subcontinent from the 18th to mid-20th centuries came the colonization of native consciousness, which established new norms on superior skin tones. Many Hindus had fallen prey to colonial and post-colonial attitudes of the inferiority and impurity of dark skin, which shaped mainstream colorist attitudes of Indians towards themselves and melded into racist views towards non-Caucasian peoples. Modern India is still heavily wounded by this narrative to the extent that it has fostered self-inflicted racism. Lingering trauma from the glaring whiteness of European colonizers and the gains of the capitalist market in the endorsement of skin-bleaching products in the entertainment industry

continue to perpetuate the narrative of the superiority of fair skin, causing a great shift in native standards of beauty.

India's caste system, however, is a different case. While not created by European powers themselves, the system, though only loosely regulated in some parts of India, gained significant importance under British rule. Originally a flexible four-varna system, which categorized people by occupation and social class, it was made a permanent structural system and drew heavily from a controversial Hindu lawbook known as the Manusmriti, or the Laws of Manu. The Manusmriti was one of hundreds of law codes in Hindu society and was also heavily disputed in its authenticity. Many of its views stood in opposition to other earlier, less-known yet more foundational Dharmashastra texts such as the Baudhayana Grihya Sutra and the Sushruta Sutrasthana (Mukherjee 271), which were more liberal in terms of extending Vedic education to all members of society.

What is worth nothing is that these foundational texts, according to scholars such as Patrick Olivelle, have influenced the Manusmriti itself ("Manu's Code" 45) despite being more inclusive than their successor. This leaves the possibility of insertions, deletions, and re-interpretations of a text that has withered through time and was edited by outside authorities, Hindu or non-Hindu. Nevertheless, the Manusmriti stood out to the British, who were looking to codify laws for the Indian natives without regard for the possibility of other lawbooks. Viewing the Manusmriti as the one and only "Bible" of all non-Muslim peoples of the subcontinent, the imperial powers legitimized the code's many laws to rule the non-Muslim (automatically labelled as "Hindu") natives (Davis 14). This included implementations of the system's discriminatory codes and rendered the caste system inflexible. Those who were born into a social class were forced to stay within that class, and those who did not fit into the occupations and

classes in the varna system and performed “the dirty work” such as street-sweeping, shoe-making, and leather tanning became “the untouchables” over time. Caste prejudice, built on the colonizers’ dependence on and institutionalization of an inconsistent code of laws, became an important source for exacerbating communal tensions and oppression of lower classes and granting sacred (and by extension, *all* authority) to the priestly class. All of these issues continue to ravage the independent modern state.

For the Love of Vishnu’s Body: In His Cosmic Darkness and Light

Perhaps the best redemption for the dark-complexioned via Vaishnava resources is found in the literature of the South Indian traditions, which are frequently in dialogue with Vedic hymns like the Purusha Sukta (*Rigveda* 10.90), Vishnu Sukta (*Rigveda* 1.154), and Narayana Sukta (*Rigveda* 1.156) that have contributed tremendously to the modern image of Vishnu. The fusion of the three (or more) concepts or deities that are represented in these hymns—Narayana, Vishnu, and Purusha—came to resemble one deity over time. This deity was equated with the omnipresent, impersonal Brahman (the universal force), and darkness quickly became an attribute that was fixed onto his iconography. It is this darkness that serves as a major theme throughout the sensual writings of many Vaishnava saint-poets, who challenged the “dark is impure” rhetoric. Chief among these saints is Vedanta Desika, a 13th century Vaishnava philosopher and theologian known to have composed works in the Sanskrit and Tamil languages that describe the sensual beauty of Vishnu’s skin tone, which colors the cosmos in its darkness. Desika also uses native South Indian imagery to praise the “Lord [who is] as blue-black as the eye of a peacock’s tail” (Hopkins 4). He stays true to the tradition of *bhakti* (devotion) in his emphasis on the love for the divine image. Love for Vishnu’s body, albeit anthropomorphized as

dark-skinned, is viewed as a means for spiritual progress and union with Brahman, whose darkness fills and expands the universe:

O Lord of Truth to your servants,
Your lovely body is dark as lamp-black
As the deep blue kaya blossom...

If we do not forget the beauty of your body,
We will not be reborn again! (Hopkins 4)

A similar trend can be seen among the North Indian bhakti tradition as well, which developed after the influence of Southern bhakti. Sixteenth century saint-poet Meera Bai similarly latched onto the immanence of Vishnu in cosmic darkness:

the city seeks
its lord
dark of hue
As a night
its moon...

Under every leaf
have I looked.
The lanes,
the secret
nooks.

The city, high
on a hill.
Below, the river
dark
as fear

without its lord,
says Meera. (Meera 5)

While Vishnu's embodiment in dark skin is redeeming for victims of colorism, the transcendent quality of Vishnu suggests that Vishnu is *not just (neti-neti)*. Interestingly, another name of Vishnu cited by sources like the Harivamsa is *Hari*, meaning "yellow" or "bright." It is possibly a reference to Vishnu's early associations in the Rig Veda as a sun deity or as the creator of the sun (Rigveda 7.99.2). Vishnu's continued association with the sun manifests in additional names and epithets like *Surya* ("sun"), *Savitr* ("rouser, stimulator") referring to a Vedic solar deity, *Suryanarayana* ("Sun-Narayana"). The Bhagavad Gita also picks up this solar/primeval being imagery:

[Vishnu] who is omniscient, the most ancient one, the commander [of all things], subtler than the subtlest, protector of all, incomprehensible, [he who has qualities] like the sun, beyond darkness, [one] contemplates [him]. (Bhagavad Gita 8:9)

When analyzing the dominant "gold-complexioned" imagery of Vishnu in this verse, we are inclined to recognize the contradictory existence of an entity that is fully bright and fully dark. However, Vishnu as an all-pervading principle fully exists in the qualities of brightness and darkness and yet does not, for he cannot be fully or only dark if fully light and vice versa.

Therefore, he ultimately is immanent in and transcendent of brightness, darkness, and everything between in the spectrum. In relation to the issues of skin color, the transcendent aspect of the embodied being suggests not a superiority of one shade or complexion over another but provides a sense of affirmation for those who identify themselves as possessing a certain complexion. The paradoxical nature of brightness and darkness as encompassed by the “complexion” of Vishnu offers both immanence in and transcendence of multiple identities, which refutes modern India’s strife towards a homogenous, fair identity and celebrates its dusky peoples.

Vishnu, the Self-ish: Self-Expansion and Self-Delight

When Krishna and his cowherd friends were sitting in the meadow and eating lunch, the creator god Brahma observed the omnipotent Vishnu, who had incarnated as a human on earth. Surely Vishnu had to have lost some of his divine abilities by being confined in a human body. Thinking in this way, Brahma decided to test the prowess of Vishnu-Krishna. He placed the calves that grazed nearby into a deep sleep and hid them, and while Krishna went to search for the missing calves, Brahma placed Krishna’s friends into a deep sleep and hid them as well (Bhagavata Purana 10.13.15). The young toddler searched for his friends and their calves, yogurt dripping through the gaps between his fingers. Upon realizing that this was the work of Brahma, Krishna expanded himself into the number of missing cowherd boys and their calves, matching their exact bodily features, their clothing and their lunch bags, their names, ages, forms, mannerisms and personalities. In the guise of the different calves and cowherd boys, he went home and simultaneously entered the different cow sheds and homes as if nothing unusual had happened, preventing the agitation of the mother cows and the boys’ parents. An astonished Brahma kept the real boys and calves hidden for one earth year, and every day, he saw Krishna travelling and playing with other Krishnas, who watched over the Krishnas that grazed among

the meadows, played their Krishna flutes and wandered around in their Krishna clothes— all while outwardly appearing to be the community of cowherd boys and calves (Bhagavata Purana 10.13.45-50). Upon seeing so many Vishnus and realizing that Vishnu is all that exists, Brahma was moved and realized his mistake. After a single blink, he saw that everything had instantly returned to normal with the many Krishnas posing as a single Krishna, standing alone, yogurt melting in his fingers as he searched for his friends and the calves. Convinced of Vishnu-Krishna's power and all-pervasive nature, Brahma apologized and returned the boys and the calves (Bhagavata Purana 10.13.64).

The above narrative, which is included in the Bhagavata Purana, is a testament to Vishnu's most-cited ability throughout Hindu mythology— the ability to assume any form(s) as needed for accomplishing tasks. This ability to take on a body speaks to the *avatara* doctrine, the doctrine of incarnation. Vishnu's purpose is to incarnate repeatedly on Earth and rid the world of injustice as necessary, and these various manifestations of Vishnu cover a wide variety of social classes and occupations without a doubt of the divine status of each manifestation. These manifestations hardly circumscribe to the “limitations” placed on them by caste-typical norms and societal divisions of ritual purity, sacredness of the upper classes and the profaneness of the lower classes. In fact, Vishnu *fully* participates in a profane world in spite of his sacredness. The Bhagavata Purana contains verses which describe the mischievous antics of Vishnu as a young Krishna who, though divine, owns the role of an infant who crawls in cow dung and suckles from the breast of his human mother. Here, there is a daring push of boundaries between the sacred and profane, between ritual cleanliness and purity. If the divine is willing to descend “low” enough to utilize human bodily processes in the material world, for what reason can the sacred priest's notions of purity and the *shudra's* impurity be justified? Surely in a world that

strictly divides between the sacred and the profane, Brahman would have no reason to concern itself with the profane material reality, let alone incarnate to fulfill a purpose, and yet, the divine has no qualms against degrading to a human body, staying true to its identity as a universally-pervading force.

As the personification of indiscriminating bliss that is present within all aspects of materiality, Vishnu seeks delight with whichever form he assumes and constantly reveals his identity and sense of Self within the multiplicities of the world. The above narrative illustrates how Vishnu-Krishna essentially interacts with and finds delight in what is essentially his own collective Self. Vishnu is a “self-ish” deity who has poured himself completely into the world and has absorbed it within himself, taking on various forms and identities— which are basically extensions of his own nonplural cosmic form and identity— and consistently working in favor of preserving and uplifting them. If Vishnu was not a selfish divine, or rather, if Vishnu did not delight in his cosmic self and associate himself so intimately with the world, he would feel repugnance in taking on the forms of the diverse boys and their calves and their clothes and cowbells, but by assuming forms in different appearances and communities (*varnas*), he posits himself as being one with them all.

Prakriti (Nature): Gender and Sexuality

Hinduism has, perhaps, the greatest presence of the divine feminine and the most extensive rhetoric on a genderless divine principle among major world religions. A significant number of sacred texts affirm Goddess-oriented traditions, and a wide variety of stories contain themes of gender-transformations, transsexuality of mythological characters, and cross-dressing of numerous deities. In spite of this, the subjugation of women and sexual minorities, also exacerbated by the Laws of Manu and the patriarchal Victorian ideals of the British monarchy,

has lingered and taken away from Vishnu's empowering feminine imagery and creative sexuality. Vedic elements which speak to the outcry of injustice against women and add complexity to Vishnu's femininity have been treated with benign neglect, even written out of existence by patriarchal religious authorities. Meanwhile, stories depicting dutiful housewives, sacrificial virgins, the importance of *pativratyam* (husband-worship), and the cruciality of procreative ideals for women (and by extension, sexual minorities) have prevailed to cater to male dominance in many Hindu societies. Modern India is no exception to this. It is worth noting, however, that Vishnu's strife to rid the world of injustice in his many mythologies does not prevent him from utilizing trickery and taking on diverse embodiments, including female and queer forms, to achieve what he wants. It is also worth noting that Vishnu's manifestations, male or female, binary or non-binary, are all fully and equally imbued with divine presence.

Vishnu, the Thief of Hearts

When a sage cursed the gods of the Hindu pantheon to lose their strength, knowledge, and immortality, they engaged in competition with the demons for the *amrita*, the drink of immortality that was to arise as one of the gifts from the Ocean of Milk. After advising them to cooperate with the demons to churn the ocean and obtain its gifts, Vishnu promised the gods that they would ultimately receive the amrita and regain their strength so they could uphold life on Earth. Soon enough, the amrita rose from the cosmic ocean, but to distract the demons, Vishnu took the form of a beautiful woman— Mohini, the “one who enchants.” She who robs her lovers of all good sense stole the hearts of the demons while secretly handing the pot of ambrosia to the gods, helping them regain their prosperity and authoritative positions in the upper realms. Mohini-Vishnu's nature is not restricted to simply the art of seduction, however; when the demon Rahu disguises himself as a god to drink some of the ambrosia for himself, Mohini

beheads Rahu. This legend is a testament to Vishnu's identity as a world-parent and his involvement in the affirmation of life—traditionally a Vedic motif of femininity, for women are classified as life-bearers.

This is not the last we see Vishnu-Mohini play an active role in the destruction of demons and the affirmation of life in Hindu mythology, and her achievements are not completely unusual for the average Vaishnava, who envisions Vishnu as the seducer of worlds with his charm and trickery. In his extended mythology, Vishnu as a seductive deity drags the best of materialists into his otherworldly charm, but the same Vishnu also pulls the best of ascetics into material charms if divine purpose demands it. To cite an example, an abandoned portion of the Ayodhyapattinam Sri Rama Temple in Salem, Tamil Nadu is noted for its erotic wooden reliefs of a nude Vishnu-Mohini surrounded by aroused ascetic sages, suggesting the Bhagavata Purana-esque “eros-agape motif” (Sheridan 261) which stresses the inescapable charm of an unconditionally loving divine in relation to a seduced world (Coleman 408).

It is not to say that Vishnu's seductive nature comes from his identity as female, for his charm encapsulates all parts of the spectrum of gender and sexuality. One example of this is Vishnu-Mohini's consorhood with another Hindu god, Shiva, and the duo's formation of the composite “androgynous” form of *Harihara* with Vishnu occupying the “feminine” portion. According to another version of this legend, Mohini-Vishnu changed back to the masculine Vishnu in the middle of her coupling with Shiva but continued to make love to him, arguably suggesting a consensual “homosexual” act (Böck 331). In yet another version of the story, the love-struck Shiva and Mohini embraced during their coupling, merging into one body, combining the masculine and feminine natures into one entity (Böck 332). The narratives of the liaisons of Mohini and Shiva and the mythology of the Dravidian god, Ayyappa, the fruit of

Mohini and Shiva's coupling, are popular resources of gender and sexual fluidity in Hinduism and demonstrate Vishnu's willingness as a "life-bearer" to take on effeminate qualities. Given his popular association with the themes of nourishment and preservation of life, Vishnu also does not back out of motherhood imagery in his mythologies. Among his many epithets, *jagadyoni* (womb of the universe) and *padmanabha* (lotus-like navel) are testaments to well-known Dravidian myths of Vishnu birthing Brahma, the creator god, through a placenta-esque lotus that grew from his navel (Bryant 18). It is evident from these resources, along with numerous others in Vaishnava theology, that to strip Vishnu-Mohini of her/his creative gender and sexuality is to deny Mohini-Vishnu's creative embodiment, particularly Vishnu's immanence in and transcendence of sexual and gender fluidity.

Conclusion

The looming question that exists in the minds of the pious is the significance of utilizing religious stories in making ethical decisions. The religious imagination, in particular, would feel hesitant about interpreting these stories literally. After all, human beings cannot shapeshift, change genders in seconds, or be half animal and half human. Human beings might have a certain complexion in the spectrum of fairness and darkness, but can they expand themselves into more than one person? Are human beings capable of possessing thousands of arms and legs or holding the universe in themselves? Only the divine can perform these kinds of miraculous actions.

It is definitely a valid concern for the religious reader to separate divine power from material examples and analogies, and humankind has limitations to where it cannot perform these miracles. I propose, however, that the matter of interest here is not the question of how to replicate these miraculous events exactly as they might have "occurred" but instead ask the

question: *why?* Why is it that Hinduism has the resources for the image of a cosmic power that reconciles opposites, is beyond those opposites? Are these stories conjured up by the limits of our anthropomorphism? If so, then it is not possible to say anything at all about the divine. If that is the case, then what to do about the resource of incarnation that exists within the tradition? Why are these diverse images of Vishnu important?

I contend that even if these stories are impossible, the image of Vishnu that they collectively construct mirrors the intermingling duality present in the religious imagination: the transcendent and the bodily. Vishnu's identifications with various kinds of bodies provides an array of images suggesting the diversity of the cosmic divine and questioning the legitimacy of fixed dualities. For religious practitioners, especially, the image of an omni-joyous divine—divinity that finds joy in all of the forms it takes— allows for the recognition of the creative potentiality of the differences that can exist in this world. In spite of our inability to capture the universe within our mouths, we nevertheless have the capability of opening our minds to change.

Holding onto the image of the dark, selfish thief— particularly in the context of modern-day India and the social issues that currently plague the country— can be an influential way to construct a worldview that is more inclusive in manner. We have the ability to expand our selfhood in the sense of making connections with others and standing in solidarity with the marginalized. We have the resources to cultivate self-love and self-compassion in a society that places the pressures of duality and differentiations on us. We have the potential to prevent discrimination and allow for plurality to foster in the environment rather than develop aggressive norms that can marginalize other members— Hindu or non-Hindu— within Vishnu's cosmic body.

Vishnu, the Owner of Spectrums

It is the Supreme Unity of all contradictions: in It alone, all differences are harmonized. That which you see as other than righteousness and unrighteousness, other than all this cause and effect, other than what has been and what is to be— tell me That.

(Nikhilananda 30)

The cosmic image that members within the Vaishnava tradition cling to possesses neither light nor darkness, none of the social classes, neither smallness nor grandness, neither maleness nor femaleness, neither binary attributes nor nonbinary attributes. Simultaneously, this cosmic image owns all these attributes with its immanence, for it cannot be removed from the world considering the limitations of human language and understanding. The body of Vishnu is the home of all these contradictions. Its immanence in full darkness and full light is representative of Vishnu's existence within the spectrum of colors and complexions. Its immanence denotes the expansion of his selfhood to the point of pervading the spectrum of all beings and castes. Its desire for the world and desire to seduce the world results in his immanence within and beyond the spectrum of natural inclinations. Ultimately, the image of the dark, selfish thief presents prospects for rectifying the forces of social injustice and paves the way for liberation, the purpose for which the image manifests itself “age after age” (Bhagavad Gita 4.8). In a society that is plagued by many fixed dualities and multiplicities, the worldview of the universe existing within the body of Vishnu is redeeming for Hindus by harmonizing and simultaneously celebrating difference. Indeed, there would be no discrimination if Vishnu is all there is:

That con man Hari has conned the world,

But brother, who can live without him?

Who's whose husband? Who's whose wife?

Death's gaze spreads— untellable story.

Who's whose father? Who's whose son?
Who suffers? Who dies?
With his conjuring he snatches away
Your roots. No one can see
[Vishnu's] trickery.
Kabir's heart accepts the thief.
Cheating disappears
When you recognize the cheat. (Kabir 402)

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