

Visiting the Temples

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Abstract

This essay reflects on a visit to three Hindu temples in the Cato Manor area of Kwazulu-Natal. Written in the genre of narrative scholarship, it makes use of imagery, metaphor and personal narratives in addition to analytic commentary. Encounters with temple devotees at each of the temples reveals their powerful devotion to the so-called folk goddesses, and an understanding of spiritual practice in which both monism and multiplicity, Brahman and the Mother Goddess, abstract philosophy and embodied ritual practice appear to coexist. The visit to the temples is interpreted in the essay against a critique of the totalising effects of materialist modernity and patriarchal monotheism, as well as a sense of the ecological, social and spiritual costs of the dominant development paradigm. In this context, the radical alterity of the temples evokes the hope of an other way of being in the world.

One afternoon in the last years of the old regime, three friends and I set out to see the temples. Travellers from the city, we drove a car and carried a book, a camera and a map of Durban and surroundings. It marked our destination clearly, and to begin with the route agreed with what we'd expected: off South Ridge into Bellair, then right into another street. The tar was cracked and the street names were different from the ones on the map. Things grew green and wild on either side, old trees and weeds marking where houses once stood. At the top of the hill, the road became a dusty track through high veld grass. But a rose bush and an avocado tree spoke of a community that had once lived here, and someone had spraypainted graffiti on the crumbling wall of an abandoned shop. We were looking for a temple in Dromore Rd, but there was no temple and no road. Across the veld on the other side of the valley we could see the high modernist buildings of the city centre. The car bumped downhill, hitting potholes.

We never found that temple, but there were plenty of others. The area is called Cato Manor, the home of a large Indian community until it was proclaimed a white area under the Group Areas Act. People wrote protest letters to the government, rate-payers' associations held meetings, and in 1958, 30 000 Indians took part in a demonstration against the removals. And still they destroyed the houses, and made the people move miles away to Chatsworth, leaving only the trees and the temples standing. Now there are new houses in the area, and new people are making it their home. But at the time when we visited, just beyond the creamy walls and glassy malls and mowed lawns of Durban's Berea, there were gods and goddesses dwelling among grasses and anthills. And still today, the people who return to where their homes once were will ask you to remove your shoes. They come to offer marigolds and milk, to paint the sculptures, keep the temples swept and clean, to tell the stories of the place, and once a year to walk across live coals.

I

In the economic or social or political histories of Indian South Africans, there is usually a small place for reference to religion, and an even smaller place for mentioning the Hindu temples. Indentured labour, conditions on the sugar plantations, Gandhi, *satyagraha*, *swarajya*, the conflicting class interests of merchants and colonial Indians, the erosion of the caste system, the riots of 1949, the Natal Indian Congress, forced removals, political mobilisation, the lives of traders, lawyers, factory workers, waiters, market gardeners, activists, doctors, women. These subjects are appropriate for research and study. But the temples, and the things people do there, are another story. In his detailed social and economic history of the Indian working class of Durban, Bill Freund remarks that "Temples and shrines dotted the landscape" (Freund 1995: 37). Dotted? What is the vantage point from which the temples are reduced to dots on a landscape? Freund's study is an important example for writing "history from below", and yet on the subject of the temples the point of view zooms far off-ground. The paragraph goes on to refer briefly to Hindu ritual practices and performances, but while these activities "were seen and participated in by the whole community, men and women" (Freund 1995: 37), it seems that their interest for history is peripheral.

If the temple rituals do not feature much in historical narratives, they are also alien to the language of monotheism. When the Orientalists went to India to study its religion, they carried the idea of one God in their suitcases along with all the other colonial baggage. Bewildered by the profusion of painted deities they met, they said that the real Hinduism must have been obscured, although its essence was recoverable in the texts of the Vedas. Later Hindu reformers were strongly influenced by these interpretations: the tendency to favour text-based philosophy over temple-based ritual, and the imposition of

Western views and values into both traditional texts and worldviews.¹ And so it was said that philosophical Hinduism is really a form of monotheism, while the religion of the temples is polytheistic. The first was higher, more intellectual, while the second was a lesser form, suitable for the illiterate. Because devotees of the temple deities are said to perform rituals without much accompanying thought, it was believed that they are not interested in philosophy. Their practice is bodily, expressed in action rather than the activity of mind. In particular, the worship of the Goddess in her many forms was an expression of folk religion, a memory of the villages which educated people would rather forget.

Whether the narrative is that of materialist history or monotheism, there is a sense in which the staring eyes of gods and goddesses and their multitude of companions in the temples evoke an other knowledge. The fragrant smoke of their incense, the bright bright colours of walls and archways, the bodies, the dancing, the drumming, the trances, the marigolds and carnations, the offerings of milk and mantra, the peacocks and the burning coals, the dreams and miracles, the joy and terror of these things seem to be assimilable to the sensible modern mind only as an otherness, a wildness, a curious aberration. Perhaps this is because modernity, the arrogant offspring of cynical materialism and a colonising monotheism, is ignorant and fearful of the abundant world it has displaced. Its bulldozers plough up the forests and grasslands to plant vast fields of a single culture. Its stories tell the single truth of development and progress. Its children dream the dream of single selfhood.

To the beef-eating British rulers in India, the millions of cattle they saw roaming unhindered throughout the country made no sense. If only the Indians would give up their ridiculous devotion to the sacred cows and eat some of them, the people would be better fed, and the resources that the cows consumed could be better allocated. It took anthropologists to recognise that the ancient relationship between cattle and people in India was symbiotic, not competitive, that the cultural taboo was preserving an essential element of the country's rural economy.² Then in post-colonial times, in the name of development, things did begin to change. People were encouraged to send milk to big new factories in the cities to be made into sweets, and children in the villages became hungry. For the first time, there was no longer any milk for them to drink. It was called the White Revolution, this story of the new imperialism: of milk and development, of poverty and efficiency, of centralisation and malnutrition.

When I was in India I met Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna, a brave old man whom many have described as an environmental saint. He was living at that time in a tin shack in front of the proposed Tehri Dam in the Himalayas. About the dominant idea of development, he said: "We use our prosperity to impoverish the Earth, which is the source of all prosperity. We are eating up our basic capitals like soil, water and forest in order to become very prosperous" (Bahuguna 1997: 92). And what are the gifts of development? War and problems of internal

security, pollution and depletion of natural resources, poverty and hunger. So Sunderlal has worked for decades throughout the villages in India, walking across the country, organising local people and passing on folk songs about *jal*, *jungle* and *jamin*, water, forest and land. His work led to the formation of the Chipko movement, in which village women came together to defend the ancestral forests which had sustained their communities for generations. Holding hands to encircle the beloved trees, the village women sang as the machineries of development came, in village after village after village.

What does this have to do with the temples? Although I am a city-dweller, middle class and globally networked, like the women in the villages I too fear for our children in the presence of the bulldozers. Growing up in Natal, the single green of the canefields which covered the hills was familiar, even soothing, and the ebullient brightness of the temples in the Indian part of town was charged with an unsettling difference. Years later, the plantations of monoculture now seem ruthless and ignorant, while the temples evoke a way of being in the world whose fragrance calls to the heart.

On the edges of modernity and in the midst, bodies imbued with the beloved and terrifying energy of the Mother Goddess, the voices of her devotees in Cato Manor are friendly to my questions, their speech full of miracles, philosophy and ordinary devotion. Is it possible for me to listen to what they are saying, to see what they're doing, to write it down? My head is full of words and cautions. I'll tell the stories of our visit as well as I can.

II

If one day you come to shore in a foreign country, what will you do to make yourself at home? My ancestors, or people like them, had the land cleared, railway lines and churches built, and rose gardens planted. They called the people they brought to Natal to work in the sugar plantations "Indian".

To say that most of the immigrants were Hindu rather than Muslim erases the regional, linguistic, religious and caste differences which had marked their lives in India. But then it can also be said that the indentured labourers who were grouped together in Natal did suffer a common experience, that new communities began to form, that temples began to appear. Sometimes a cobra in the veld would show them where to build. Sometimes it was a river or a tree. In time they learnt to interpret what the foreign land was saying, to inhabit its spaces.

The Gengaiman shrine was built in 1909 over a sacred anthill near the Umkumbaan river that waters the Cato Manor valley. People recognised the life-giving spirit of the Ganges in this river, so the small corrugated iron temple honours the Mother in her watery aspect: Gangamai, sap of the world.

The man sweeping the entrance put down his broom to greet us. He was slender, a tall man with greying hair and shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow. There

was a quietness in his eyes, a quietness in him, in which my questions fluttered and came to rest. "Yes, please come inside," he said. "Just leave your shoes at the door." We waited for the family group circling the temple to pass. A young man carrying milk and a banana called to me as they went: "You think we worship many gods. But that's not true. This is one God we worship."

Inside the temple the sacred anthill had grown so big that it pushed against the walls, nearly touching the roof. "Look at the head and arms," our guide pointed. "It's taking on human form, growing all the time. But I've never seen one ant, not in all my sixty years." The anthill was dressed in a golden silk sari, with garlands of marigolds around the neck. There were offerings on the floor, a bell, a bowl, and religious pictures. Someone had been burning incense. "The face changes all the time," he said. "One night I came here and I saw the perfect face of a beautiful young goddess. The next morning my wife saw me looking at the face, and she asked why. I told her that I was looking for what I'd seen the night before, but it had already changed." On the other side of the room was a smaller anthill. It started growing one day, and now it too was pushing up against the wall. Nobody has ever seen an ant in the shrine, but a snake comes sometimes, and one of the women gives him a saucer of milk.

Outside the door, cars roared past. Bellair Road was built straight through the temple grounds, separating the building from the altar and the Kodi pole. Standing on the threshold, looking out, we heard what happened when the Council came to lay the water pipes: "When they started to dig the trench for the pipe, they found that the workers standing on that side, to the right of the temple, couldn't see further than a few feet ahead of them to the left. And the ones on the other side couldn't see further than a few feet to the right. There was something in the air between them, and they couldn't understand it. You see, the Goddess didn't want the water pipes. But they dug the trench anyway, a very big trench, very deep. No sooner had they finished work and packed up their tools when it started to rain. It just came down out of a blue sky. For fifteen minutes it poured down, and when the rain stopped the whole trench was filled up. It was full of earth again, just as before. All their work was for nothing. The next day when they came they knew they must do it quickly and finish. So they dug and laid the pipes and covered it up, all in one day. And here it is now, right outside the door."

We crossed the road to the altar. "I remember these things because this is where I grew up," he said. "That was our first house," pointing at a grove of trees on the hill. "My father planted those trees. Then we moved to where that tree is, and then over there. Then they moved us out." He paused, remembering.

"But I come back, of course, cleaning the temple, sweeping the floor. People say to me 'Why don't we see you praying?' But for me this work I do is enough. It's like a kind of prayer. And I'm here every day after work. The temple is like home to me." The houses of his childhood are broken and lost, yet there is a

quietness in this man who comes each day to sweep the temple of the Mother. Sweeping the dust and cleaning the dirt in the shrine of the beloved: this is the practice of home.

"And the river? Do you often go down there?"

"Well that's a problem. Of course we'd like to go to the river because this is the river shrine you know, for Gangamai. But that sports field's there now. And they put up a fence. It's a long walk around to get to the river."

III

Getting out of the car at the Second River temple, we smiled awkwardly. Tourists. This time, the man who came out to speak to us was powerfully built, with thick glasses and a white cotton shirt open at the neck. I showed him photographs of the building in an architectural study. He was interested, but not for long. He wanted to tell us himself.

"You see, this temple was first built in Durban, and it was called the Umbilo Shree Ambalvanar Alayam Temple. Then one day the Council wanted to build a road where the temple was, so they sent in a surveyor to look at the place. He had hardly begun working before something exploded in his brain, and blood shot out through both his ears. He fell down dead on the spot. So they sent in another surveyor, and he had hardly begun working when again something exploded in his head, and blood shot out through his ears. He fell down dead like the first man. A third time they sent a man to the temple, this time in a bakkie with three workers. When they reached the place, the bakkie suddenly turned over onto its roof, and all the men were killed. So then they realised that they could never destroy the temple. All they could do was to bury it. So they buried the temple under a big hill of earth, and built the road over it. That was the South Coast Road, you know the one. There's a temple underneath it."

Above the entrance we could see the divine couple: Siva with the moon in his hair, and a snake around his neck, together with Sakti, his consort. It's like the tympanum above the doorway to a Gothic cathedral, Heaven's gaze encompassing all who enter. But this is not a tale of judgement and mercy, or the glorious victory of spirit over flesh. Phallus and lotus, lingam and yoni, these smiling divinities tell a different story. On either side and all around the temple hundreds and hundreds of divine beings glare, smile, dance or meditate above your head. Their sensuous limbs are brightly painted, and they are surrounded by demons and mermaids, rainbow arches and jewelled flames.

"It's all one God," said our guide, gesturing towards the multitude. "It doesn't matter if you're Christian or Muslim, we're all worshipping the same God." Then looking at Paul he said, "When I look at you I see God." And then to Rosemary, "When I look at you I see God." And then to me, "When I look at you I see God."

In the dualistic world of monotheism there is no god but God or Allah or Jehovah, and He is the true and only Way. But here in the temples, though we call it by many names, the myriad abundance of all things and beings is really One. This is a different insight. Each leaf, each fruit, each child is Brahman, each man is Brahman, each woman is Brahman, eating, sleeping, thinking, waking is Brahman. God is not separate from the Universe: One without a second.

"That's Nandi, isn't it?" I asked, pointing at the big white bull in the courtyard.

"Yes, Nandi the bull, sacred to Siva. You see he's looking at Siva, but he can never look at him directly. His head is always turned slightly away out of respect. Siva is too powerful."

Cows are sacred, milk, ghee, curds, dung are sacred. Mothers fry spices in ghee, mix curd into vegetables, cook cheese in a curry, and stir and stir the milky cardamom sweet rice pudding over the fire. When preparing food, let yourself become peaceful and calm. Eating is the first yoga.

"The peacock is also sacred, see this one here."

Once when I was a child I heard the voice of the temple peacocks, on a hot Good Friday afternoon in Pietermaritzburg. The temple courtyard was filled with the smell of incense and dust, and people jostling barefoot to see the fire-walking. When the devotees of the Mother came through the fire, ecstatic bodies filled with her power, we were too far back in the crowd to glimpse their feet. But I'd seen the deep fire pit before they walked, and I could feel its heat, and through the crowd I saw their heads, garlanded with marigolds, their eyes far away, and their cheeks and tongues stuck through with needles. Someone was chanting, someone was shouting about shoes, the drummers were drumming, the ice-cream seller rang his bell, calling "Eskimo pie! Eskimo pie!" and the peacocks screamed and screamed. When it was over we were all suddenly drenched by a thunderstorm. Running to the car we met the Christians emerging from the three hour service. "Bad Friday!" someone shouted to my mother through the storm.

"I hope you'll be here for the fire-walking," said our guide. "It's in two weeks time."

"I'm afraid I won't be. I have to go back to Cape Town."

"Postpone your visit! It's the chance of a lifetime. We have thousands of people here on the banks watching, and you'll get good vegetarian food. The coals are so hot that the rake they use must buckle in the heat. Then I'm the first one through the fire. I carry the *karakam* for the Divine Mother Draupadi."

"Can you tell us what it feels like?"

"It feels ... like heaven. But I can't explain. It's like heaven where I'm walking, and very hot all around. Afterwards not even my toe-hairs are singed."

"You see my chest," he said, opening his shirt to reveal a long scar. "I've had four heart by-passes, and they thought I wouldn't make it. But the Mother came

to me and I survived the operation. The doctors said I must rest for four months, but then the time came for the firewalking. All my life I have walked through the fire for the Mother. How could I fail Her after she had saved me? Six weeks after the operation I got up from my bed. I still had the clips here in my chest for the wound, but I prayed to the Mother and then I walked, all the way from the temple to the river, from the river to the fire. I walked through the fire that day, and up the steps over there, and into the temple to the feet of the Mother. Then I bowed down and said thank you. I will pray to Her as long as I have life."

Ma, Mama, Mata Mai, milk of the Mother, Mother of all living. Here across the valley from the city, the world is charged with the beloved, loving, fearsome, fragrant power of the Goddess: Draupadi, Sakti, Parvathi, Durga, Kali. Here in the temple courtyard, in the myriad multiplicity of things and beings, the Earth is still our Mother, nature is alive, all life is sacred.

"The Earth is our Mother. Perhaps you noticed when I was speaking of Her before, my voice became throaty. I can't speak of the Mother without tears. I feel such love for Her. Just as we must respect our parents, we must also respect our Mother Earth. Don't kick your foot to scuff the earth. Don't throw garbage. It's disrespectful."

Our guide took us on a walk around the temple, explaining who all the sculptures were. "Do you mind if I take photographs?" I asked self-consciously, ashamed of the traveller's eye that frames, the modern lens that marks our separation. And yet I wanted them all, the pictures to take home, the stories to tell.

"That's fine, go ahead," he said. "This is a nice one, Siva as the Lord of the Dance. You see the drum in his hand? He's beating the rhythm of creation, and his dance is bringing all life into being. That's the fire and the flowers and birds all around him, the dance of Maya, illusion. His right foot is on the head of a demon, the demon of ignorance, and his left foot is always in the air. When he once puts down that foot, the whole universe, all life, will come to an end."

Turning a corner of the building, we met a plump menacing figure theatrically shaking his sword, painted eyes staring. "I suppose you think that a demon is something with horns and a tail?" our guide commented. "But demons are not like that. Demons are people. You remember Firwood?"

"Firwood?" We looked doubtful.

"Firwood, that Prime Minister. He did the homeland policy and all that."

"Yes, of course."

"Well Firwood was a demon. You can tell that he was a demon because of the way he died. How did he die? He was stabbed. That's how demons always die."

The day Verwoerd was stabbed, I was dancing in the water of the sprinkler on the green lawn of our garden singing "Doh a deer, a female deer" when my parents told me the news. Somehow they didn't seem sad. They didn't believe in demons, but I knew about Rama and Sita and the demon king Ravana who stole

Sita away. Then Hanuman and his brother monkeys made a bridge across the ocean so that Rama could get to Ravana and destroy him. The man who told us the story, a kind yogi with a long beard, taught us to sing: *Shri Ram, Jaya Ram, Jaya Jaya Ram, Shri Ram, Jaya Ram, Jaya Jaya Ram...* Hail Ram, glory to him, victory to him, over and over again. When Gandhi was shot in 1948, he was on his way to a prayer meeting. Dying, his last word was the Ramanama which his nurse Rhamba had to taught him to repeat as a child: *Ram*.

“Do you recognise this one?” he asked, pointing to a thin bespectacled figure. “It’s Gandhi, of course. We had him up there no less than two hours after his death. The people were busy on the temple, and when we heard the news on the radio everyone’s heart was sore. At once the sculptor started working, and within two hours he was finished, that very same afternoon.” Although he did not himself share what he called the idolatry of the temples, the Mahatma of history and hagiography, of the people’s *satyagraha* and *khadi* cloth, is now enshrined above our heads, seated among the painted sages.

Inside the temple our guide showed us the figures of the deities. “You might call them idols. But they are really icons.” Then he pointed to a mound of earth to the left of the goddess. “This is for the fire-walking. We put seeds in the earth, every kind of seed there is, and then we watch to see how they sprout. It’s the Mother’s way of telling us what will happen at the fire-walking, to let us know whether something might go wrong. These coconuts are also for that. We open one each day.”

“And what if you find that something is going to go wrong?”

“There’s nothing you can do. You have to go through with it anyway. One year I came here and the last coconut was split right open, as though someone had cut it with a chain-saw. I knew it must be something terrible, and I prayed and prayed to the Mother to protect us.”

“And what happened?”

“I walked through and I was fine. Then two other people walked and they burnt their feet. The fire burnt the soles of their feet right off! They had to stay in hospital for months.”

IV

There was a festival in the garden of the Shree Poongavana Amman Temple when we arrived. Seeing the circle of drummers and dancers we hesitated, watching from outside the gate. Perhaps we should just go home. Nobody came out to greet us, but people smiled and we went to join them. Together we watched the devotees gathering to circumambulate the building. The drummers led the procession, and others followed carrying tall jars covered with marigolds. There was a woman of about my age whose face was painted purple. She had long dark hair like me, parted in the centre like mine, and tied in a thick plait which hung

down her back. She wore a rope over her shoulder. "They'll walk around three times," someone said. "Then they go inside."

The straggling procession collected on the verandah and a man who seemed to be a priest stood on a step and spoke. Then they moved inside. "You must go in too." We were uncertain. "Yes, yes, go inside. Just open your shoes." Our shoes joined the others in the heap. A camphor flame was burning from a hole in the floor at the entrance of the temple. I stepped over it into a small, sweet-smelling room filled with bodies and the sound of drumming.

The woman with the purple face does not speak. Moving slowly among the people, moving with the drums, she dips her fingers into a bowl of ash and rubs it on a forehead. She never stops smiling and the people cluster around to face her. A thin old woman finds a space to dance in. The priest kneels down and whips his own back with a rod: one, two, three. The purple woman moves among them, and somewhere behind it all, Durga is riding her tiger and Kali the black one, the terrible Mother, watches through the smoke.

I'm also watching, from just within the doorway. I can feel the drumming and smell the camphor, but I want to be closer inside the cluster of bodies. My feet edge in. What must I do to be blessed? "Go! Go!" someone pushes me towards her. "Stand over there, with the others."

Marigolds, camphor, candles, drumming, fire. Close to her now, I can see the beads of sweat on the purple colour, the dark eyes looking into my eyes, the soft round of her cheek. Someone passes her a baby, very small, a few weeks old. Holding it by the wrists she flings the baby towards the Goddess, swinging it in a wide arc through the air, and smiling. Once, twice, three times. Then she cradles it in her arms, rocking to the sound of the drums. When she gives it back to the parents it begins to cry. A man gives her another baby, and this time she walks around the room with it, smiling and rocking. After some time the father wants the baby back: "Give my baby back," he says. She smiles and shakes her head, turning away. "Give my baby back!" But she holds out her palm to him and smiles. He scratches in his pocket and gives her some coins. She shakes her head, and holds out her hand. He gives her more money, and then some more. "Give my baby back!" frantically now. She smiles and turns from him. He wants to grab the baby, but someone stops him. "Give my baby back now!" She lays the baby on the floor and gives the father his money back. Then she dips her hands into a bowl of water and splashes it over the baby three times. As it begins to cry she picks it up and passes it to an older woman, smiling. What will she do now? A moment ago I was standing right next to her, but now she has turned away from us.

The fragrance of the Goddess is incense, marigolds, sweat, smoke. Someone says, "Kneel over here, and hold out your hands." I kneel in front of the priest. He dips his hands in a bowl of ash and rubs it on my forehead. Then he pours some ash into my cupped hands. We bow. I stand up again.

"Put it in here," says a voice, holding out a piece of torn newspaper. I pour

the ash into it. He folds it up neatly and returns it to me, smiling. "You must look after it carefully now. Whatever you were thinking will come true."

What happened after that is no longer clear, but the ceremony continued and people were talking, cuddling babies, kneeling to receive the ash, or wandering out into the sunlight. A woman took my arm: "You must stay and eat with us. Have some nice porridge."

"Yes, thank you. We'd like to."

We sat outside on benches at a long table, with vegetable curry and a kind of spinach on our plates and fermented porridge in a cup. Someone explained that the porridge was very special. It had been fermenting in the temple for three days. He said that the spinach was drumstick leaves, picked from the branches of the drumstick tree. I wished I could like the sour taste of the porridge and the fire of the curry in my throat. Everyone was so friendly, heaping more and more onto our plates.

After lunch we started saying goodbye. But people wanted us to stay: "What about the chicken? You must stay for chicken."

"I'm sorry, we have to go. And we're vegetarians, we don't eat chicken."

A teenager came towards us with a parcel wrapped in newspaper. "It's for you, something from my father."

"Thank you very much. What is it?"

"Something special, from the priest."

On the way home in the car we opened the parcel of temple food and found half a banana, pieces of mealie, beans and some groundnuts. There were dark marks on our foreheads, and each of us carried a small handful of ash, neatly folded in newspaper.

"Whatever you were thinking when you received the ash will come true," said Kevin. "I wish they'd told us that before. I would have asked for peace in South Africa."

V

Once you have accepted that the map is unreliable, the temples are really not difficult to find. The myriad painted forms of gods and goddesses stand out clearly, like exotic visitors, gorgeously dressed, while the canefields seem to merge into the landscape of Kwazulu Natal, their impact familiar, almost invisible. But the colour of the sugar cane is all the same green, and the strip of various wild on the edge of the road is all that is left of what it has supplanted. If, like me, you grew up somewhere in the dream of modernity across the valley, white sugar was probably always on the table, incense burned with an unfamiliar sweetness, and the noise of the bulldozers was almost inaudible. Monocropping, monoculture, monotheism: the bulldozers smash up the numberless fragrances of scrub, grasses and spring flowers to clear the land for a single cash crop; the

bulldozers destroy forests which have taken care of animals and people for generations; the bulldozers erase homes, stories, multitudes.

In the temple of the heart, the foot of the dancing Siva Nataraj rests easily on the head of the demon, and the Mother Goddess smiles as she burns up ignorance and forgetfulness. On the edges and in the midst, between the road and the sugar cane, native plants still grow, and even the canes themselves, in spite of all pesticides, are home to communities of mice, rats, snakes, insects, myriad beings. Shri Sunderlal walks from village to village passing on the people's songs of resistance, and forest women join hands to hug the trees. Sita comes home alive when Rama sets her free from Ravana, and every year Draupadi guides her true devotees safely through the burning coals.

Each traveller who leaves home carries bundles of longing and fear. Visiting the temples in Cato Manor I imagine a place where insight is embodied in the pungent sweat and joy of devotion; the radiant multiplicity of the world is the body of the Mother; each life is Brahman, One without a second. And yet, though the stories of the place are real and true, may their hope renew the sentient Earth when the empire of our delusion is burnt out?

The sacred ash is powdery, ash-grey. But the little piece of folded newspaper that I have buried in the garden encloses something that is always open to interpretation. Irresistibly, its presence recalls the ending of another story. They say one day, at the end of days, when the dance of things is over, the fire in Siva's hand will burst into conflagration. Burning ever brightly, the Lord of the Dance will draw the birds and the flowers and the people and all the worlds and stories back into himself. The dancing fire will be transformed into a womb of water, and this womb of water will open to receive the ash.

Notes

¹ I am indebted here to D. Pratap Kumar's helpful account of the role of the Orientalists in constructing contemporary Hinduism (Pratap Kumar 2000: 203-210).

² For example see the account of William Rivers' research on the relation between buffalo and the Toda people in John Reader (1988: 177).

³ As Alleyn Diesel notes, possession trances are a prominent feature of Tamil festivals in KwaZulu Natal. "In this state people adopt the characteristics associated with the possessing deity, so that very often women possessed by one of the fierce goddesses behave in wild, uncontrolled, and assertive ways, generally regarded as unacceptable for women in traditional Hindu circles" (Diesel and Lambert 2002: 4).

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