INTRODUCTION

*Maya*: art, wisdom, extraordinary or supernatural power (only in the earlier language); illusion, unreality, deception, fraud, trickery, sorcery, witchcraft, magic … an unreal or illusory image … regarded as the source of the visible universe.\(^2\)

To say that the universe is an illusion (*maya*) is not to say that it is unreal; it is to say, instead, that it is not what it seems to be, that it is something constantly being *made*.\(^3\)

*Maya* is, then, usually equated with *nama-rupa* or ‘name and form’ … when it is understood that form is ultimately void – in the special sense of ungraspable and immeasurable – the world of form is immediately seen as *Brahman* rather than *maya*.\(^4\)

This thesis analyses the role in Indian cultural history of a long standing concept, *maya*, with a particular focus on its application in the post-independence era public realms of film and politics. It seeks to demonstrate that *maya* is a defining word in the foundation of a worldview and, as so, is not solely a philosophical idea, but is manifested in the changes and continuities of Indian cultural expression. The enduring representations and perceptions of *maya* in late twentieth century India reflect on aspects of the modern era, such as notions of ‘self’ and ‘nation’, and on India’s efforts towards adaptation and change within that time. For that reason, in this thesis *maya* is itself proposed to be a useful tool for analysis of, and perspective on, historical and cultural incidents and attitudes, just as it was a defining measure of truth in ancient Indian philosophy.

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\(^1\) No diacritics are used in the thesis. Words and names are commonly written in their Anglicised forms (Shiva for Siva, for example).


Maya, a ‘term of outstanding importance’ is difficult to translate in one word. From the Sanskrit root *ma*, to measure or to make, *maya* is the impermanent and, therefore, *qualified* reality of the phenomenal world. The ‘measured out’ (created) world that is *maya* disguises the fundamental reality of the undifferentiated, unchanging origin of being, which in Sanskrit is *brahman*. Metaphors are often used to explain *maya*: for instance, that it is the wave and *brahman* the ocean. The wave appears a discreet entity, but is merely a temporary emanation of the ocean. Hence, *maya* is often translated as ‘illusory appearance’, or as the ‘magic power’ of creation. 

*Maya*, appearance, is *nama rupa*, the ‘measured off’ multiple names and forms of the apparent world. In truth, *maya* and *brahman* are non-dualistic, just as *atman*, the human soul, and *brahman* are as one when understood as such. The understanding of this most fundamental deduction about the meaning of existence, the knowledge of *maya*, underlies and influences other foundational assumptions of Indian thought and, consequently, of its cultural heritage. Moreover, the varying interpretations of *maya* have constituted the basis for the formation of differing schools of Hinduism and even find resonance in the Sufi branch of Islam, while *maya* as ‘impermanence’ is a principle article of Buddhist teaching.

*Maya* is the essential element of a complete ontology and to be fully appreciated must be seen in that context. Many of the prime concepts of Hinduism are, in effect, identified with *maya*. *Shakti* is the power of creation, the transformative force that brings a tree from a seed, a child from a womb, or decay to the dead. Hence it is known as female power, both threatening and benevolent. *Shakti* is appeased and celebrated in the many forms of India’s Goddesses, one of which is the Great Mother.

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5 Indologist Jan Gonda has characterised *maya* as such, and as a ‘very difficult term’. J. Gonda, *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion*, Mouton & Co., the Hague, 1965, p. 164. The brief interpretation of *maya* I have given, above, is based on the *Advaita Vedanta* (non-duality) teachings of the 9th century sage, Shankara. Later schools of thought, such as the qualified duality (*Vishishtadvaita*) of Ramanuja (11th century), and the non-duality (*Dvaita*) of Madhva (13th century) had different views on the nature of reality, with *maya* a central term of dispute. I will address these differences more fully in Chapter 1.

6 Indian philosopher Ruth Reyna writes that *mayavada* (the *maya* doctrine) can be presented ‘in its various applications as the fundamental and ruling concept of all orthodox schools of Indian thought in their respective explanations of the phenomenal world, and the relationship, if any, to the existence of the real’. Ruth Reyna, *The Concept of Maya: From the Vedas to the Twentieth Century*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962, p. 70.

of the universe, *Mahamaya. Lila* is the ever-changing ‘play’ of the phenomena of
creation, the unceasing movement or ‘dance’ of the universe in which everything has
its part. But this dance of life is also the beguiling *maya*, its creations neither
enduring nor independent as they appear to be. *Maya* as the material world (*prakriti*)
is the dazzle of life that is *brahman*’s emanation, but is, too, a barrier to the
realisation of *brahman*, and the freedom resulting from such realisation. That freedom
is described as *moksha*, bliss. In this worldview, *moksha* is the primary human task,
for it means surmounting the false limits imposed by *maya*: limits such as
egocentricity (*ahamkara*), the idea of time, and the dualistic world of birth, death,
and rebirth (*samsara*).

The trap of *samsara* is caused by forgetting the nature of the world as *maya*, and
the resultant separation from *brahman*. The knowledge and transcendence of *maya*’s
limiting boundaries lies at the heart of Indian scripture, religious practice and art and,
through *dharma*, its social world. *Dharma* means order, and sustains unity in the
world of ‘names and forms’ that is *maya*. Almost every facet of Indian everyday life,
and the yearly cycle of festivals, customs and worship, is ruled by consideration of
*dharma*, which is ‘both the whole system of Law, moral and legal, that has its
foundation in the transcendent order, and the specific system of rules and regulations
under which a given individual lives.’

*Dharma* is sometimes equated to ‘religion’, a category for which there was no term
in Indian tradition, as it implies the very separation of physical and spiritual qualities
which itself is *maya*, division. Instead, *yoga* meaning union (with the Absolute), and
therefore an elimination of *maya*, is another term substituted for the theological

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8 Vijay Mishra writes that *ahamkara* or ‘sense of I-ness’ must be denied in the Indian culture which
‘constructs its social and spiritual values with reference to the need for this self-denial.’ He comments,
moreover, that the ‘I-ness’ of *atman*, related semantically to *brahman* ‘... tells the Hindu that there is
always another self, larger and much more permanent ...’. Vijay Mishra, ‘Defining the Self in Indian
University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996, pp. 118 – 121.
9 This statement is a generalisation, and is indicative rather than particular, but the close study of *dharma*
and Indian society is not within the scope of this thesis. A qualification must be made, though, that as India
has placed more emphasis on ‘secularism’ in its modernising process, *dharma* is now more closely
confined to religious values than it is to social organisation. See K. M. Panikkar, *The Foundations of New
10 J. A. B. van Buitenen, ‘The Classical Drama,’ in Edward C. Dimock, Jr. et al. (eds.), *The Literatures of
India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974, p. 83.
‘religion’. Historians and social scientists have commonly accepted that Indian society, politics, and culture combine to produce a way of life where ideas of ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ are inseparable. The idea of religion as a category divided from the ‘broader cultural dynamic’ is a vision imposed by the European Enlightenment heritage, for:

Other cultures and pre-Enlightenment Western culture did not view the human social world in this manner – they simply did not carve up the world in the way that we do. Religious phenomena were seen as part and parcel of political, social, and other cultural forms. The separation of religion from these is founded on a secular Enlightenment approach.¹¹

Increasingly, from around the eighteenth century, Enlightenment values were to attain worldwide hegemony alongside the expanding influence of the Western nations proposing them. Central to these values was the conviction of empirical reason and rationality as foundational to a view of progressive human history. That view of progress included an emphasis on individual rights and freedoms, a breaking away from the ‘darkness’ of traditional authority towards the ‘light’ of science and secularism.¹² During the era of British rule in India these ideas, abetted by Christian and Utilitarian judgements of Indians as amoral, degraded, and generally inimical to the Western version of progress, served to justify the imperialist presence as beneficent modernisation. Thus, the worldview underpinned by maya, and expressed through India’s cultural practices in art and religion, would be discredited in a value system so firmly set in empirical, dualistic versions of reality. In the mid-twentieth century the philosopher S. K. Saksena wrote of the influence of the maya concept and its role in the ‘reproach’ Indian that thought received from the Western world:

That the cause of India’s present backwardness, political and economic, should have been put on the shoulders of the philosophical theory of maya

¹² Ibid., pp. 44 – 46.
is an evidence of the fact that the theory was believed to have been followed in life.\textsuperscript{13}

But \textit{maya} was not clearly apprehended by many Europeans through their own historically influenced conceptual frameworks and cultural prejudices.\textsuperscript{14} Ronald Inden comments that:

The primary mental property which Indologists attributed to Brahmanism was either an errant imagination deluded by its metaphysical wanderings or the creative imagination of a lower, sensual soul. Neither of these was derived from the study of Indian texts and practices but rather were supplied from a European psychology.\textsuperscript{15}

\textit{Maya} meant that the world was a \textit{form} of the ultimate, but in the Western imagination it had become a ‘familiar criticism that for Hindu thought the world is illusion’.\textsuperscript{16} Philosopher Ruth Reyna, in a similar criticism, aims to ‘clarify the erroneous notion held by Western and some Eastern writers that \textit{maya} means “illusion” in the sense of “imagination” or “hallucination”’.\textsuperscript{17} The ideology of \textit{maya}, then, was seen as the antithesis of scientific realism and, by extension, of modernity, for this image of ‘the world as illusion’ lay at the heart of British views of Indians as fatalistic,\textsuperscript{18} unworldly, and apathetic; as ‘governed by a disorderly imagination instead of a world-ordering rationality’.\textsuperscript{19} Undoubtedly, \textit{maya}, and its various elucidations, was foundational to Indian religio/philosophical schools and had been for millennia a pervasive notion throughout Indian culture, as a persistent motif in the

\textsuperscript{15} Ronald Inden, ibid., p. 109.
\textsuperscript{17} Ruth Reyna, op. cit., p. ix.
\textsuperscript{18} Another important term, \textit{karma}, meaning action and its results, was often equated with ‘fatalism’, adding to the impression of Indians’ apathy and superstition.
mythological tales shared by the many and varied sects, creeds, languages and regions of the subcontinent.

Maya, then, is notable on two counts: as the essence of a distinct and longstanding ontology, and as a major culprit for imperial notions of Indians as ‘other-worldly’, incapable of self-governance in the modern world. For these reasons the continued role of maya in the modernised, western-influenced India of the late twentieth century is a subject worthy of inquiry. It is a study which could risk being judged as ‘Orientalist’\(^{20}\) or ‘romanticised’, but which recognises the value, for all human thought, of this important concept. Maya holds a primary place in that which Indian cultural scholar Kapila Vatsyayan has termed ‘the significant and indispensable framework of the philosophic thought and psychical concerns of the Indian people’.\(^ {21}\)

After the redrawing of national boundaries and the gaining of independence from colonial rule that occurred worldwide post World War 2, a reassessment of historical frames and an accompanying revisioning of national identity was taking place in public and academic arenas. One of the most influential and seminal of the scholars of ‘postcolonialism’ was Edward Said, whose now well known theory of Orientalism\(^{22}\) proposed that Europe (‘the West’) had defined itself, advantageously, against the ‘Other’, the colonised nations of ‘the East’. In this definition, the West and East were, respectively, advanced and primitive, active and passive, rational and mystical, and other such dichotomies. These decreed values had become stereotypes imprinted on world opinion, marginalising non-Western countries into ‘third world’ status, not only to their financial detriment, but striking to their very sense of selfhood through disparagement of their ethnicity, religions, and traditions.

Such an unbalanced view must be remedied by the inclusion of scholarship which would reposition the previously colonised nations at the centre of their own

\(^{20}\) In this instance I refer to that which Vijay Mishra has dubbed ‘Orientalism2’, a category of ‘ethnographic classification and racism’ as developed by Edward Said; ‘Orientalism1’ is, rather, ‘a matter of scholarly analysis and disputation’. Vijay Mishra, Devotional Poetics and the Indian Sublime, State University of New York Press. Albany, 1998, p. 28.


narratives, in a rethinking of Euro/America-centric epistemologies. Post-colonial studies became an important cross-disciplinary field of theory in history, literature and the social sciences, although the term ‘postcolonial’ itself came to be viewed as prejudicial, once again deferring power to the colonisers.23 A nation would now be envisioned not only through its leaders or through its relationship to European history, but through the lens of its common (subaltern) people and its own cultural references. Canadian Professor of English, Arun Mukherjee24, is one scholar amongst the many who began to protest the universalisation of culture that is effected by terms that had become commonly accepted: terms such as ‘third world’ and ‘commonwealth,’ for these scholars believed there could be no true understanding of a nation without a recognition of its cultural specifics.

It was important that cultural re-appropriation must not lead to a nativism, or indigenism, which may refute the changes, and the particulars, of history.25 Idealist nativism, the romanticising of a culture, can lead to another form of stereotype, as attested by the rise of various ‘fundamentalisms’ through this same period, and a stamping of groups and individuals as ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ to the culture or nation. The danger of defining terms such as ‘Hindu’ or ‘Indian’ too narrowly, or too sweepingly, is also a consideration in such studies,26 and the defining of ‘religion’ is seen by some scholars as a critical junction in the whole epistemological and historical debate.27

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24 See Arun Mukherjee, ibid.
26 ‘Hindus’ as people of the Indus River, was an ‘umbrella’ term applying to all the sects, races and creeds of that region. Being ‘Indian’ does not, now, equate with being Hindu, as the people of the subcontinent were classified by British census requirements into more clearly defined groups based on religion: Muslim, Jain, Christian and others as well as Hindu. Yet the politically charged term ‘Hindu’ is still under debate (see, for instance, J. E. Llewellyn, op. cit.) A well known Indian social scientist has written of his own ‘tendency to speak of the West as a single political entity, of Hinduism as Indianness, or of history and Christianity as Western. None of them is true but all of them are realities’. Ashish Nandy, ‘The Intimate Enemy’, in *Exiled at Home*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2005, p. x.
27 In particular, Richard King, op. cit., has examined this extensively.
In his essay ‘Subaltern Histories and Post-Enlightenment Rationalism’ Dipesh Chakrabarty has steered a course through the conflicting views centred on the replacement of Marxist critique (favoured by Indian historians of the Left, such as eminent social historian Sumit Sarkar) with that of a critique of Enlightenment rationalism. Chakrabarty refutes the idea that a criticism of Enlightenment legacies necessarily accompanies a rejection of rationalism, or of the tradition of rational argument. There had been though, since colonial times, ‘an intellectual tradition in India that has often equated idolatry with the practices of the superstitious; superstition was matched with ignorance, with the unscientific and as such, was not modern. All aspects of religion had been subsumed into this modernist rejection of any practice or thought that could be associated with ‘superstition’. But the idea of a secular state envisioned by the proponents of that modern intellectual tradition did not allow for (or explain) the manner in which religion is ‘a major and enduring fact of Indian political life’. The ideology of secularism had separated the ‘religious’ from the ‘political’ in a manner that does not fit the reality, for, as Chakrabarty states, the ‘pull of the Hindu gods and goddesses is hardly of a kind that one could call otherworldly’. A type of ‘hyperrationality’ has prevailed, he notes, so that:

... we do not have analytic categories in our aggressively secular academic discourse that do justice to the real, everyday and multiple connections that we have to what we, in becoming modern, have come to see as nonrational.

Richard King, in his study *Orientalism and Religion*, addresses this same theme by examining what is meant by European definitions of ‘mysticism’, which, as a term for experiential knowledge of God, became associated with power structures: the authority of ‘the mystic’ must not undermine the authority of the Church as mediator

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29 Ibid., p. 21.
30 Ibid., p. 22.
31 Ibid., p. 22.
32 Ibid., p. 23.
34 Richard King, op. cit.
between humanity and divinity.\textsuperscript{35} ‘Mysticism’ was associated with the ‘Other’: the unscientific, unworldly, irrational, emotional pre-modern era. Such ideas, perceptions or experiences were, thus, politicised both locally and abroad, an aspect of the politics of knowledge that became an irrefutable element of colonialism. By relegating India to the ‘mystic east’ and defining mysticism and religion in western Christian terms (with a monotheistic, ‘personal’ God), these categories were excluded from the realm of rational, rigorous thought and artificially separated out from other social constructs. King suggests we have much to learn by rethinking that exclusion.

It is against this background of historical and conceptual reassessment that the idea of \textit{maya} stands out as an exemplar of both King’s and Chakrabarty’s arguments. \textit{Maya} proposes the falsity of all firm dichotomies; when understood in its full sense, \textit{maya} is both ‘mystical’ \textit{and} rational, both a metaphysical notion and one affirming to the science of physics. It is both affective, inclusive of emotional responses to the world, and logical, pertaining to reason. As such, it can be overcome by \textit{bhakti}, devotion, or \textit{jnana}, knowledge. It allows an ambiguity which underlies the ‘uniqueness’ of Indian culture claimed by social scientist Ashish Nandy, when he wrote that ‘the culture itself demands that a certain permeability of boundaries be maintained in one’s self-image and that the self be not defined too tightly or separated mechanically from the not-self.’\textsuperscript{36} Static definitions and exclusive certainties lead to the oppositions found in communal politics and national boundaries, both problems increasingly urgent in post-Independence India. But ‘uniqueness’ must also be allowed. If, within this multi-dimensional nation of many languages, races and creeds there can exist the often-sought classification of an ‘Indian worldview’ or ‘identity’, it must be one inclusive of differences, while also acknowledging them. While distinctions are evident, there is also a commonality, composed of:

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\text{... those foundational philosophical, religious, metaphysical, physiological/medical assumptions which inform to a greater or lesser degree contemporary practice, and which are more or less shared across genres and domains of practice ... [T]hese foundational assumptions have}
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\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{36} Ashish Nandy, op. cit., p. 73.
often remained in the background and are not self-consciously articulated or represented by practitioners.  

Those words of cultural scholar Dr. Phillip Zarilli pertain to the Indian arts, but they can equally apply in the broader social sphere. The artistic arena is recognisably interconnected with India’s traditional patterns of thought: here, the link between philosophy and its manifestation in cultural practice is commonly acknowledged. Some elements of philosophy or metaphysics, especially dharma, karma, and rasa, have been studied in their application to Indian cultural expression, and generalised references about that culture commonly refer to the transcendental, the unifying and the mythological. But maya, so foundational to the meaning of these other well-analysed ideas, does not appear to be applied, in recent scholarship, outside the philosophical realm, although as trickery (or in the twentieth century terminology ‘spin’) it has long been recognised as a political device.

It is essential to a discussion of culture and history to analyse the changes that occur over time to an idea such as maya: these are addressed by both Jan Gonda’s ‘Maya’ in his Change and Continuity in Indian Religion, and Ruth Reyna’s The Concept of Maya From the Vedas to the Twentieth Century.

Reyna traces maya historically, and describes the understanding and application of maya from the viewpoint of the different schools of thought that arose during this long period. But, writing as a philosopher, Reyna does not present maya as an agent in the broader cultural sphere. Gonda’s decision on maya is that, although applied in many ways according to its different shades of meaning, it has not essentially changed. Teun Goudriaan, in Maya Divine and Human addresses the magical connotations of maya in particular, since he believes that these have ‘never lost

38 Maya has been associated with the trickery of politics since ancient times. Heinrich Zimmer cites instances of this ‘creation of an illusion’ from the Mahabharata, Brahmanas and the Arthashastra. See Heinrich Zimmer, Philosophies of India, Bollingen Series XXVI, Princeton, 1989, pp. 110 – 125. As recently as the 2004 Indian general election opposing parties were accusing each other of ‘mayajual’ – casting a net of illusion.
39 J. Gonda, op. cit., pp. 164 – 197; Ruth Reyna, op. cit., passim.
40 Teun Goudriaan, Maya Divine and Human, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1978.
ground in Hindu religious history’ despite being overshadowed by the metaphysical traits of the concept. The ‘magic’ element of *maya* is important because ‘in the non-speculative mind the ideas connected with it were liable to gravitate around that focus’.41 That approach to *maya* serves to reify the idea, making it applicable and familiar to daily life, and therefore of significance to this thesis, the purpose of which is to identify the role and application of *maya* in the public culture and thought of recent years.

I have outlined the historical background, the scholastic trends and the studies of *maya*’s historical meaning that have formed a motivation for this thesis, which will apply the philosophy of *maya* to current social and cultural practice, questioning its contemporary place. Though none that I have discovered have used the concept of *maya* specifically, it is often included as part of a textual analysis related to myth, religion, art, literary or social appreciation, such as in Heinrich Zimmer’s illuminating study *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty’s *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities*, or David Schulman’s *The King and the Clown in South Indian Myth and Poetry*.42 Hindu metaphysical concepts, more generally, have been applied in a similar critical way. Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan has led the production of a series of volumes on Indian arts, the aim of which is ‘to comprehend the arts within the context of the Indian world-view, notions of space-time and interconnections, at the level of theory and practice’.43 In the field of literary and film analysis, Professor Vijay Mishra has made several thoughtful contributions informed by Indian metaphysical and aesthetic categories.44 He has written of the ‘dharmic’ and ‘karmic’ readings of Peter Brook’s theatre and film production of *The Mahabharata*, while in the same volume Rustom Bharucha has given ‘A View from India’ critical of that production’s misunderstanding of Indian aesthetic and realistic

41 Ibid., p.1.
expectations. In Linda Hess's insightful description of the Ramlila in Varanasi, she evokes the multiple layers of reality in which the participants (who include the spectators) of this pageant are engaged as a consequence of their way of viewing the event. Marie Gillespie, watching televised episodes of *Mahabharata* with a Hindu family in England, noted their alternative (to her own) perceptions of reality and ideas of time, writing that:

... notions of Time, fate, destiny, enlightenment, self-knowledge, reincarnation, and salvation are deeply embedded in their consciousness and frame their everyday reality.

Finally, Sumita Chakravarty, in her exploration of Indian views (or lack of interest in the concept) of realism in relation to Indian film, is of the opinion that:

[strong ideas about individualism, democracy, linear time, and material progress go against the grain of Indian philosophical speculations and experiential value systems...the conventions of realism are generally absent from India’s oral storytelling traditions.]

But 'realism' is a genre, 'reality' a broad metaphysic. Sanskritist Wendy Doniger argues that there are different (not absent) versions of what is 'real' in her clarifying and thorough description of *maya* and its ambiguities (above).

These, and many more studies, address associated aspects of the idea of *maya*: cyclical time with its round of reincarnation and the emphasis on the long ages of mythology; a reality that embraces a simultaneity of past and future as part of the endless 'process' rather than the 'result' of Western linear time; identity as

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evanescent, and Indian artistic and religious culture as associated with the general term ‘transcendent’; the world charged with beguilement and the magic of brahman as depicted in the great mythologies and their commentaries. Maya is associated with ‘the mystical’ and ‘the irrational’ in a broader marginalisation of religion as separate from the other categories of ‘reality’. As a result, although maya, an undeniably pervasive notion, is frequently referenced, these studies do not specify the term maya as a direct analytical lens.

That lack of attention or recognition of the important concept of maya leads to several questions. Is the idea of maya viable in the ‘real’ world of late twentieth century India apart from its use as a religio/philosophical teaching? If so, in what manner is it used and understood? Moreover, can the complex idea of maya be applied to a deconstructed understanding of culture and society in the same manner as associated ideas, such as dharma or rasa, have been applied? If so, in what manner would that application further historical assessment in a particular or a general sense?

In addressing these questions, the thesis, although underpinned by the idea of maya, of necessity broaches a broad terrain of historical, religio/philosophical, and cultural studies. In that undertaking, a cross-disciplinary methodology is used which, in part, deconstructs and historicises a range of Indian films, predominantly of the post-independence decades. The art industry of cinema has been chosen as study for its quality of broad social reflection over the changing times of several decades. Moreover, despite the interpretative disadvantage for an English speaker with minimal Indian language skills, comprehension is made accessible in film not only by the (admittedly limited) medium of subtitles, but through the more universalising quality of vision. From the evidence garnered in film, then, the thesis provides an examination of the manifestations of maya in cultural expression in a particular historical context. Proceeding into the realm of civic action and politics, the thesis will then apply the principle of maya both as a standard of truth and as a criticism of the art of political ‘spin’ (imagery or manipulation, depending on one’s standpoint), in two particular instances. Firstly, a reading of M. K. Gandhi’s reports of his own changing persona in his search for personal and national freedom will be shown to
illustrate *maya* both as a creative art and as deceptive and instructive appearance. Secondly, through charting the series of events following the 1998 screening of the controversial film *Fire*, the idea of *maya* as symbol and as the ‘name and form’ of identity can be clarified, while a perspective on the political nature of the debate surrounding *Fire* is, simultaneously, allowed.

A closer summary of the thesis follows, in clarification of its purpose. The first and second chapters provide a foundational understanding of *maya* and its historical place in Indian thought. Chapter 1 affords an overview of the idea of *maya* in the classical literature of India.\(^{49}\) The intention is twofold: to demonstrate the range of meaning within the term, and to illustrate the idea’s provenance, its continuance and its recognition across a range of Indian religions and thought. The notion of *maya* has, arguably, informed the underpinning of the wider cultural consciousness, especially through popular mythology and the perennial poetics of devotional song.

In Chapter 2, the metamorphosis of concept into the material world as art is explained. Indian art has been inextricably linked with religion. It expresses the unseen, the formless, beneath the sensible world of form. The traditional canons of the Indian arts and their associated aesthetic standards, whether those of theatrical arts or the architectural, were interconnected in purpose and performance, their details set down in specialist texts and passed on through specialist practitioners. The arts provide a focus for devotion, and a relationship with the gods that is both informative and celebratory as well as pragmatic. Art is the doorway between the world of *samsara* and the world of *moksha*: by definition art is *maya*, the creation and the illusion.

Chapter 3 furthers that definition of *maya* as the art of creation and illusion, and also as a defining element of truth in an altogether different sphere, by extending the implications of *maya* into the personal, social and political world: that of the ‘father of the nation’, M. K. Gandhi. Gandhi’s famous ‘search for truth’ for himself and the fledgling Indian nation involved an ever-changing recreation of identity. That

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\(^{49}\) ‘Classical’ in this instance refers to the enduring and well known literature of India, not restricted to that of the period 500BCE – 500CE which is sometimes categorised as the age of Classical Hinduism.
evolution was manifested in memorable form by his intentional and dramatic changes of costume as he moved between life phases, simultaneously creating a path for India to follow towards freedom from British rule. This chapter serves to bridge the abstract, classical representations of *maya* and its application in everyday life, while also bridging, as did Gandhi himself, the ideas of tradition and modernity, and the passage into the timeframe of post-independence India.

Chapter 4 is focused on that post-independence era through an exploration of the idea of *maya*, and its connotations, in the enormously popular art form of the twentieth century, cinema: exemplar of illusion. Cinema is a reflection of the times, the aspirations and the social milieu of its creators and consumers, and in Indian cinema the idea of *maya* is found in both direct and indirect application. This chapter will demonstrate through an assessment of selected films that *maya* is used to suggest illusion, mystery or deceit through the word itself in film title or as character name; as a perspective on the idea of selfhood or of the nature of God and devotion; or as an inherent part of mythological reference and traditional Indian aesthetic devices (as explained in Chapter 2).

The predominant section of this chapter is an analysis of Keralan director Shaji Karun’s 1999 film, *Vaanaprastham*, for its complex elucidation of the ideas of *maya*. Importantly for the premise of the thesis, the significance of the *maya* ontology is woven in juxtaposition with the conflicts of tradition and modernity. Like *maya*, this film is multi-layered; it encapsulates many allusions, both subtle and easily apparent, that clarify *maya*, while its production at the juncture of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is significant for the new internationalism then occurring, and the resultant reassessments of cultural practice and thought.

Also included in this chapter are short commentaries on other selected films – including several of those of the iconic mid-twentieth century director Raj Kapoor – for their depiction of *maya* through changing periods of time, and through the genres of both popular (‘Bollywood’) and ‘Art’ films. Moreover, the word *maya* itself is
used suggestively in film’s titles, or as a name, to signify moral conjecture: a sign of the idea’s enduring recognition.

Chapter 5 continues a connection between the ideas of *maya* and film through an analysis of Deepa Mehta’s 1998 production, *Fire*, and the public fracas that developed in its aftermath. In this conjunction of fiction and politics, the *maya* that is ‘name and form’ can be seen as the *maya* that is, similarly, ‘identity’: an attempt to prescribe static boundaries to a fluid subject. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its affiliated organisations created violent protests over the screening of this film. *Fire* questioned Hindu family relations by depicting the love between two middle class sisters-in-law, and their rejection of their roles as wives. In reaction, and in a clear instance of divide-and-rule, protestors against the film announced themselves to be the saviours of Hinduism and by extension, of India itself. But this was a limited version of ‘Hinduism’ and of ‘India,’ one that was created by historicising mythology, and redrawing history, to attain selected images (the *maya* of appearance) of ‘Indianness’. In an echo of, and a reaction to, imperial Britain’s ‘naming’ and ‘forming’ of Indianness in previous times, the narratives in *Fire*, and those proceeding it, proclaimed many competing visions of Indian identity and its attributes.

The warning of *maya* which is so fundamental to Indian teachings - that it is the trap of exclusiveness and separation – was also the warning of Deepa Mehta’s film which, she stated, was about ‘choices’, about recognising the non-homogenous nature of human society and the individual. In applying the understanding of *maya* to *Fire* and the incidents which followed its screening, a perspective is achieved which allows the fullest possible acknowledgement of competing truths – or, at the least, a more tolerant and inclusive vision which sanctions difference, and multiple possibilities, within the ‘unity’ of nation, and within definitions of social constructs, such as that of ‘family’.

Through the recognition of the important role of the idea of *maya* in Indian thought, and through tracing the continuity of that idea in varied manifestations into
the twentieth century environment, a renewed emphasis can be placed on this culturally foundational and useful concept. It will be understood as an essential element of perspective on history: on the objective assessment of the constructed nature of self, nation and of the politics of illusion.
CHAPTER ONE

Maya in Classical Literature

Jan Gonda on *maya*:

It cannot ... be said that the idea itself has in the course of the last twenty-three centuries or so been essentially modified. What was at first intuitively understood and imperfectly formulated, elucidated by popular similes, or intimated by means of mythological imagery, underwent, in later time, a process of intellectualisation, of deepening and broadening; the very core of the concept, however, remained unaffected.¹

The concept of *maya* has been a central aspect of Indian thought for more than two thousand years, as attested in the great treasury of the nation’s classical literature.² The purpose of this chapter is to survey elements of this literature for its expositions of the complex idea of *maya*. It is complex because of its multiple meanings and implications, yet all these apparently disparate senses can be understood, ultimately, as strands of an integrated ontology. The longevity of the idea of *maya* indicates its wide acknowledgement and appeal through the many changes of history. It has been established as part of the religio/philosophical underpinning of a diverse and vast region, as a perspective on the world that is accessible across class and creed. Despite the often metaphysical framing of the idea, it is notable, as one Indian philosopher has stated, that even the religious understanding of ‘the unlettered peasant...though by no means definitely formulated, certainly includes the two axiomatic beliefs of *karma* and *maya*.³ This conception of *maya*, whether intellectual or subliminal, whether interpreted as magic, as riches, or as the object for transcendence, can be followed from its Vedic derivation through to later Hindu philosophical schools and through representations in Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, and Sufi precepts. In both pedagogic

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² As explained in the Introduction, ‘classical literature’ for the purpose of this thesis refers to the enduring and well-known Indian literature from the Vedas to the modern age, and is not restricted to the formula of ancient and classical (ca. 1200 BCE - 1000CE), medieval (1000CE – British era), modern (arrival of Western influence). See Edward C. Dimock, Jr., *The Literatures of India*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1974, p. 14.
and popular form maya can be traced through devotional song, poetry, and mythology, and to its continued expression through well known and revered figures of the modern age, such as Ram Mohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna, Rabindranath Tagore, and M. K. Gandhi.

The earliest Hindu literature in India, from around 1500 C.E., is considered by its followers to be sacred, a manifestation of the divine in the world. It is named shruti: ‘that which is heard’, or ‘revealed truth’. Shruti literature is comprised of a collection of works which include the hymns of the Vedas, the ceremonial instructions of the Brahmanas, and the mystical treatises of the Upanishads. Further writings of authoritative tradition were designated smrti, the ‘remembered’. Developed over many centuries, smrti comprises a vast body of commentary, instructional literature and philosophy, including the esoteric Tantras, the law books of the Dharma Sutras, the philosophic Darshanas, the mythologies of the Puranas and the great Itihasa tales, the epics Mahabharata and the Ramayana. These works have been the genesis of further volumes of interpretation, and are integrated into more ‘secular’ theatrical and storytelling traditions. Revered gurus and bhakti saints have added their vision to the literary canon. Early oral Buddhist teachings were inscribed into works such as the Pali Canon, and a vast literature, including the Mahayana Sutras and Tantra Sutras developed as Buddhism spread and absorbed varied interpretations and regional flavours. Jains, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians have all exchanged influences in a cultural spectrum that has, simultaneously, coalescent and distinctive aspects. Within India certain ideas have remained, if not constant throughout this evolution, at least recognised, contested, and often integral aspects of the multiple religious, ethnic, and linguistic faces of India. Maya is one of these ideas.

Maya, measuring or making, is the phenomenal appearance of brahman (the timeless, infinite source): it is the deceptive multiplicity of the true non-duality of

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5 Itihasa, or ‘so indeed it was’, is a quasi ‘history’; adjoined to purana (‘ancient’) as itihasapurana it forms the overlapping perspective of ‘myth and history’ as one. See Jacqueline Hurst, Myth and History, p. 70.
6 J. A. B. van Buitenen qualifies the idea of ‘secular’ literature in the Indian tradition in writing that, ‘...if some Indian literature does not start out being religious, it often ends up being so’. See Edward C. Dimock Jnr., op. cit., p. 3.
existence. The world as *maya* is ever unfolding, and as it is impermanent, it is of only relative ‘reality’. *Maya* is the ‘magic’ power (*shakti*) of creation, the act (art) of creation, and creation itself as the play (*lila*) of the defined, ‘separated out’ forms of life. To have knowledge (*jnana*) of the nature of *maya* as the duality of the mundane world is essential to transcendence of its limits, and to experiencing the timeless reality (*moksha*) beyond the round of birth and death (*samsara*). Transcendence, though interpreted variously,\(^7\) is the ultimate goal of Hindu and Buddhist belief. Overcoming the mask of *maya* is basic to the realisation of the nature of *atman/brahman* – selfhood as at one with the source of life. That understanding has been a foundational premise, and purpose, of Indian thought, with its beginnings in the Vedic age of ritual worship and wonder about creation, evolving to the philosophical speculation of the proceeding ages. The earlier notions of *maya* are, then, concerned with its creative aspect – the magic of change, and the multiplicity of form that is conjured from the mysterious origin.

The verses composing the most important foundational text the *Rig Veda* (*RV*) are songs of praise to the wonders of the universe and to its Gods, who are associated with, and mediate, the awesome and inexplicable (and therefore ‘magic’) forces of nature. Later verses of this Veda philosophise about creation of the universe and the place within it of humankind. These hymns reveal that a monotheistic theme was emerging from a polytheistic religious background. The multiplicities of nature had been reflected in the popular belief in many Gods representing every imaginable aspect of it. Now the seers and poets of the Vedas disclosed that the vision of multiple Gods was illusory, for in truth all were the issue of the one source. This belief is clearly stated in the verse *RV*. 1. 164. 46:

> They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and it is the heavenly bird that flies.

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\(^7\) Devotionalists may interpret transcendence as overcoming the distance between self and god, while for Vedantists and Buddhists it may be a melding of personal self with the impersonal being/non-being beyond such forms as ‘self’ or ‘god’.
The wise speak of what is One in many ways; they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan.\(^8\)

The idea of Oneness, or more correctly non-duality, is progenitor of the idea of *maya* as creative aspect of all the phenomenal world, which casts an illusion of duality. *Maya* is the ‘many’, and the names; it is the individuated Gods which belong to the three realms – Heaven, Sky, and Earth – which themselves are *maya*. The ‘Creation Hymn’ (*RV* 10.129) delves further into the meaning and beginnings of things. Speculation again centres on the origin of ‘being’, and here emphasises its incomprehensible mystery. What was there before creation?

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond … Darkness was hidden by darkness … with no distinguishing sign …\(^9\)

The hymn goes on to tell of the act of creation discerned by the poet – seers of the Veda as ‘the bond of existence in non-existence’ and that the ‘cord was extended across’ which demarcated above from below; there was ‘impulse beneath; there was giving forth above’.\(^10\) The cord and bond is *maya*, the limitation of separate existence (above and below), as is the ‘impulse’ and ‘giving forth’, the birth of creation.\(^11\) Yet, ultimately, the poets admit in this hymn that creation is a mystery; the Gods ‘came afterwards’ as part of creation itself, and even ‘the one who looks down on it from the highest heaven’ may not know ‘whence’ creation has arisen. The two latter ideas – that the Gods are also a part of creation (*maya*), and that even the ineffable One which is outside creation may not ‘know’ their unfathomable origin – would, for succeeding centuries, feed not only the philosophical debate about the difficult concept of *maya*, but creation mythologies and religious ideologies of which it is a

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\(^9\) *RV* 10.129. Ibid., p. 25.

\(^10\) Ibid.

\(^11\) As I am not a Sanskritist, this assessment is interpretation, not confirmed by my own translation. Ruth Reyna states that the ‘primitive meanings’ of the term *maya* as an explanation of the visible universe are found in the Rig Veda, although the term became ‘more popularised’ in later thought in that aspect. See Ruth Reyna, *The Concept of Maya: from the Vedas to the Twentieth Century*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1962, p. 5.
foundational aspect. If *maya* is the cause of material creation, then it is also the eternal mystery of creation.

Being mysteriously potent, its means hidden, this wondrous creative force was considered magical, too. The subject of Hymn 10. 177 is *Mayabheda* – the discernment of *maya* or illusion. Translator of the *Rig Veda*, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, describes this piece as ‘a magic-dispelling incantation’. It begins:

> The sapient with their spirit and their mind behold the Bird
> adorned with all an Asura’s magic might.
> Sages observe him in the ocean’s inmost depth:
> The wise disposers seek the station of his rays.

This metaphoric verse is clearly another source foreshadowing later expositions of *maya*. Here, the wise use both mind and intuition (understanding beyond intellect) to discern *brahman*, the sunbird, within the adornment of creation: *maya*’s phenomena which serve as cover, embellishment, of the formless *brahman*, which is also the ‘station’. *Maya*’s creative power is also inherent in the words ‘an Asura’s magic might’ and its manifestation in ‘his rays’. Ashuras, sky Gods (or later, demons) were noted for their magic powers, which were either of benefit to humans, *su-maya*, ‘of good *maya*’, or, if they were malicious ruses and artifices which prevailed, they were *durmayu* – that is, they ‘used bad arts’.

Both Varuna and Indra are Ashuras, whose *maya* is heralded in the *Rig Veda* as the marvellous (seemingly magical) creative power of nature:

> I will proclaim the great magic of Varuna the famous Asura,
> who stood up in the middle realm of space
> and measured apart the earth with the sun

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as with a measuring stick.\(^{15}\) \((RV\ 5.85.5)\)

Here is another example of creation as ‘measuring’, a reminder of the etymological origin of *maya* (*ma*, to measure), while it also praises Varuna’s creative powers as ‘great magic’. Such magic is not only used for the manifestation of all phenomenal appearance, but for the god’s own manifestation of form, or notably, of forms, just as the day changes its aspects from dawn to dark. Hence:

Maghavan weareth every shape at pleasure,
Effecting magic changes in his body.\(^{16}\) \((RV\ 3. 53. 8)\)

In every figure he hath been the model:
this is his only form for us to look on.
Indra moves multiform by his illusions\(^{17}\) \((RV\ 6.57.18)\)

So the Gods are hidden within all things; conversely, all things are but an indication of the god beneath the form. These magical changes and manifestations of form are ‘his illusions’ as well as his power; as such, they can be a disguise or a piece of trickery. In the mythological battle between Indra, the king of the Gods, and the dragon Vritra who is blocking the flow of creation by holding back the waters of the world, both protagonists use their *maya* to attempt to deceive and overcome their opponent \((RV\ 1, 32. 12, 13.)\). Vritra uses his magic to create a fog of lightning and thunder, while Indra makes himself as thin as a horse’s hair to evade destruction. Illusionist displays of this type may of course be used for either good or evil, depending on the user and his/her motive. Human beings can also acquire *maya*. For example, they may take on the power of the god Soma\(^{18}\) by producing the *soma* \((RV\ 9. 83. 3)\). Sanskritist Teun Goudriaan has specified that in human use, *maya* as the art,

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\(^{15}\) O’Flaherty, op. cit., p. 211.
\(^{16}\) Griffiths, op. cit., p. 189.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 313.
\(^{18}\) Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty explains that Soma is both a god and a liquid with dangerous but sought-after effects, giving the hallucinations of trance \((RV\ 10. 136)\) and intimations of immortality \((RV\ 9.113)\); along with a feeling of immense personal power \((RV\ 10.119)\). See O’Flaherty, op. cit., p. 119.
or power, of appearance is ‘liable to degenerate into “deceit” … or into “illusionist tricks”’. 19

Although a more complete understanding of *maya* as ‘the explanation of the visible universe’ 20 was to develop in later thought, it is plain that the *Vedas* already depict many facets of the concept. *Maya* is discerned as the separating line, drawn from the formlessness of pre-existence by the act of creation, and the creative impulse (power) itself. *Maya* is, as evolving creation, the changing, magic, illusory nature of appearance and therefore its trickery; and *maya* is the many names and forms of the one God, or origin. Following these early speculations, the later Vedic era saw the philosophical teachings of the *Upanishads* gradually emerge, reflecting a time of more metaphysical pondering and introspection. It was a time in which the Buddha and Mahavira, founder of Jainism, also appeared. In the *Upanishads*, the focus is on the quest for ultimate truth and its manner of realization; this quest is encapsulated in the question ‘What is that which, when known, everything becomes known?’ (*Mundaka Upanishad* 1.1.3) 21

The answer to this essential question of truth and knowledge is atman/brahman, the unifying principle that is said to lie at the heart of life’s outward appearance, maya. It is here, in the exposition of this true knowledge (*vidya*) which the *Upanishads* address, that the concept of *maya* in its varying applications has been more fully considered. Using translations and commentary by Swami Nikhilananda and by Ernest Hume 22, Ruth Reyna 23 has categorised and enumerated the many references to *maya* in the principal *Upanishads* 24. Following her categories, this study will present selected examples from the many she has given. These examples will

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20 Ruth Reyna, op. cit., p. 5.
24 There are more than one hundred Upanishads, but either 10 or 13 principal ones are those mainly studied. Those included here are *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (BrU), *Chandogya Upanishad* (ChU), *Isa Upanishad* (IU), *Katha Upanishad* (KaU), *Kena Upanishad* (KnU), *Mandukya Upanishad* (MaU), *Mundaka Upanishad* (MuU), *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* (SwU), *Taittiriya Upanishad* (TaU), *Maitri Upanishad*. “Upanishad” means ‘sitting at the feet (of the teacher)’.
demonstrate the connotations *maya* had come to hold in that era. Moreover, they demonstrate the vital position of this concept in Vedic cosmogony, which would lead to its important place in later philosophical and religious developments. One of the most contested interpretations of *maya* in philosophy has been that of ‘illusion’.

The *Isa Upanishad* (*IU*), in a simple and evocative metaphor, expresses the effect *maya* (as illusion) has of hiding the truth: ‘the door of the Truth is covered by a golden disc (*maya*).’ (*IU* 15). And who is blinded by this illusion but ‘... one who thinks there is this world and no other’ (*KaU* 1.2.6). It is an illusory notion to believe that ‘this world’ – the ‘golden disc’ – is the ultimate reality. Those who do so cannot see that ‘...there is in It\(^{25}\) no diversity...’ (*BrU* 4.4.19). For all is part of *brahman*, which ‘projects the universe through the power of Its *maya*. Again, in that universe *brahman* (as the *jiva*, or human soul) is entangled through *maya*’ (*SvU* 4.9). Such entanglement in illusion means ‘men declare that the inauspicious is the auspicious, and that the auspicious is inauspicious...as if by enchantment they see the false as true’ (*Maitri* 7.9, 10). But a solution to this trap of illusion is given: ‘... by meditation upon Him, by union with Him, and by entering into His being more and more, there is finally cessation from every illusion’ (*SvU* 1.10). *Maya* is the illusion of duality.

It is emphasised repeatedly through the *Upanishads* that all is one, and that duality is an illusion. ‘Just as, my dear, by one piece of clay everything made of clay may be known – the modification is merely a verbal distinction, a name; the reality is just clay’ (*ChU* 6.1.4). Dreams and waking life are as one, too, and partake of an equal degree of reality: ‘As in dreams the mind acts through *maya*, presenting the appearance of duality, so also in the waking state the mind acts through *maya*, presenting the appearance of duality.’ (*MaU* 4.61). The waking and sleeping metaphor is used again (*MaU* 1.16): ‘When the *jiva*, asleep under the influence of beginningless *maya* is awakened, it then realises birthless, sleepless and dreamless Non-duality’. Non-duality is deathless, too, as death is duality, which is *maya*. This quality is expressed in the prayer (*BrU* 1.3.28), ‘Lead me from the unreal to the real.

\(^{25}\) *Brahman.*
From darkness lead me to light. From death lead me to immortality.’ Maya is the world of phenomena mistakenly perceived as ‘the real’.

The ‘real’ is brahman, the One that is all, infinite and timeless, of which the impermanent phenomenal world is merely an expression, an ‘illusory sprout’ (MaU 4.59). Kena Upanishad (KnU 1.4) warns, ‘… know That for the brahman and not this which men cherish here’, and Katha Upanishad (KaU 2.6) proclaims in a similar vein, ‘… heedless, deluded with the delusion of wealth; thinking “This is the world! There is no other!”’ The substance which composes this impermanent world is named in Sanskrit prakriti (primary matter), which, too, may be decoded as maya, manifestation.

Of prakriti, SvU (4.10) states, ‘Now, one should know that Nature (prakriti) is illusion (maya) and that the mighty Lord is the illusion maker (mayin).’ The power of manifestation (shakti) is the Lord’s maya; this is repeated throughout Shvetashvatara Upanishad, and in the words of the Mundaka Upanishad (MuU 2.1.3): ‘From It are born breath, mind and all organs of sense, ether, air, light, water and earth, which is the support of all.’ Nikhilananda has commented that to be ‘born’ is to be projected through the power of maya.26 We have already seen that in the Vedas this creative power is sometimes viewed as supernatural magic – here this idea is reiterated (KaU 5.12.): ‘The inner soul (anaratman) of all things … Who makes his one form manifold’, and BrU 2.5.9. repeats that ‘Indra by his magic powers (maya) goes about in many forms’. It is notable that the many forms, as well as being deceptive, and as apparently magical as a conjuring trick, are that which Reyna has deemed ‘symbol or educative illusion’.27

Such a seemingly contradictory state – maya of both deception and instruction – is characteristic of the slipperiness of definition inherent in the concept. But this is somewhat clarified (BrU 2.4.7): ‘As the notes of a drum, a conch-shell, or a lute have no existence in themselves and can be perceived only when the instrument that produces them is played, so all objects and relations in the universe are known by him

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26 Nikhilananda, quoted in Reyna, op. cit., p. 99.
27 Ibid., p. 99.
who knows atman (which is brahman).’ SvU 4.5. illustrates the same idea: ‘…the she-goat, red, white and black casts many young ones, which are like to her’. Brahman contains and exists in everything; the distant sound of a drum indicates its (unseen) source, the drum. Brahman is drum, the drummer, the sound, the air that carries the sound, and the hearer – one entity. Maya is a mistaken idea of the apparent separation of entities, and hides the greater truth. But it is also a bridge to the truth since through ‘each’ entity the whole may be discovered. It is a conundrum that truth is the essence of maya, and lies within it just as brahman is the spider within the web it has spun – a metaphor from SvU 6.10. Another clarification of the same idea is ‘Everyone sees his sport but no one him sees’ (BrU 4.3.14). All manifestations are aspects of brahman. Yet in Maitri U 6.3 there is a foreshadowing of much future debate, for that teaching claims, ‘There are assuredly two forms of brahman: the formed and the formless. Now, that which is formed is unreal; that which is formless is real’. The relative supremacy of these images, Saguna Brahman (formed) and Nirguna Brahman (formless) was to be a continued debate in the varying Hindu schools which later developed.

The Upanishads illustrate maya in its many aspects: as cosmic illusion, as duality, as magic, as the perceived world, as the formed world (prakriti), as the power of manifestation (shakti), and as symbol, or educative illusion. The idea of maya (duality) explains truth, for it is the other face of brahman (non-duality). In short, maya as creation is both deception and instruction; it both hides the truth and reveals it. Vedic legends and teachings filtered throughout later evolutions in Indian philosophy, mythologies, and devotional sects, so that reference to the idea of maya has continued to be central to commentary and ideology. Agehananda Bharati has written of modern times that ‘… village religion has not changed very much in India. Thus, the unsophisticated sadhu and his village audience use and understand terms like atman, brahman, maya; for them, these terms are less loaded than for the specialist, but they are used all the same’. Similarly, maya remains one of the central considerations of the six orthodox schools of Hinduism, although they conceive of salvation (from the maya worldview) in different terms.

Of the six orthodox schools, Purva Mimamsa and Uttara Mimamsa stress the correct performance of Vedic rituals and the correct understanding of the *Upanishads* as the means of salvation. Nyaya and Vaisheshika focus on logic and ontology, while Samkhya and Yoga emphasise that freedom is to be gained by the separation of the conscious soul (*purusha*) from the obscuring effect of matter (*prakriti*). The ideas of these schools, particularly of Samkhya and Yoga, are repeated as elements of other developments, for instance, Jainism, which similarly emphasises the Samkhya goal of understanding what is not, and shedding the impurities of *karma*. For this reason, the elimination of *karma*, Jainism taught the ethics of material and sexual austerity and of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, which would continue to be such a recognised and respected element of general Hindu practice.

Jainist precepts underscore the transitory nature of the objects of the world in the attempt to focus on their version of the true nature of reality, with the aim, common to the Indian religions, of release from the wheel of *samsara*. Desires, greed, and urges of the body are the stuff of deception (*maya*) for the soul. Jains reject the monist views of the *Upanishads*; their belief is in a plurality of separate souls, so that everything in existence is an individual living being. Almost in diametrical opposition to the Jain vision of plurality is another of the most influential philosophical teachings within India. This is the *advaita vedanta*, or ‘non-duality’ school of Shankara (9th century CE), which was incorporated into the *Vedanta* and has since been widely studied in India and abroad.

Shankara’s interpretation of the *Upanishads* held to the view that only *brahman* was real, and the self (*atman*) was none other than *brahman*. All conception of the self as separate consciousness or being was an illusion (*maya*). This precept was central to Shankara’s system. Realisation of the truth of non-duality effected a

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30 As can be seen above, in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, *prakriti* can be considered interchangeable with *maya* as the stuff of creation.


32 *Vedanta*: the end of the *Veda*, philosophical inquiry into the nature of *Brahman*. 
merging with brahman ‘as the drop is absorbed into the ocean’. Ignorance (avidya) is maya, for in ignorance the truth is hidden, leaving falsehood to reign. In a now well-known story, Shankara illustrated the manner in which sense perception and superimposed ideas can be misleading (maya): the truth is like a rope that has been mistaken for a snake. But for those who would more easily find truth through the senses, he conceded that conceptions of brahman may exist at two levels. The ‘lower’ Saguna Brahman, the Ishvara, is creator, lord and ruler of the world, object of devotion, yet only ‘a temporal manifestation of brahman, creator for as long as creation lasts’. The creative power of the Ishvara is shaktiyoga. In the time of Shankara, shakti worship had come to the fore, and as maya is in one aspect creative power, it was identified with shakti (as Mahamaya). Worship of this Goddess, in varying forms, has been a huge element of Hindu devotionalism and continues to exert strong cultural influence. Yet devotion, for Shankara, was a stage which must eventually be succeeded, to that of the ‘higher’ immutable, unknowable and formless Nirguna Brahman which is beyond maya.

Within the long line of exponents of the Vedanta, Shankara’s views remain amongst the most well-known to the present day, due in part to their expression through the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and his disciple to the Western world, Vivekananda. The Order founded by Shankara continues its teaching in centres in India, and Hindu scholars and mystics continue to instruct in advaita vedanta. But two later noted and influential Vedantists, Ramanuja (c. 11th century CE), and Madhva (13th century CE) developed alternative beliefs to those of Shankara.

Ramanuja’s Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-duality) met the needs of the devotional era in which he lived, and moreover, is considered more representative than advaita of the general Hindu view of life and religion. Following the anti-monism of the early Samkhya ideology, Ramanujan rejected Shankara’s theory of the

33 Pratt, op. cit., p.131.
36 Klostermaier, op. cit., p. 375.
38 Klostermaier, op. cit., p. 379.
pseudo-reality (*maya*) of the world, claiming instead that the world and the incarnated souls are real, as projections of *Ishvara* (*Brahman* as ‘the Lord’). As these souls are a part of *brahman* but ‘once-removed’, so to speak, they retained the self-consciousness necessary to maintain a relationship of worship to *brahman*. Ramanuja’s formulation paved the way for the flourishing of the theistic *bhakti* (devotional) schools that remain so much the popular expression of Hinduism since that time. *Maya*, to Ramanuja, symbolized the mysterious and marvellous in God’s creation, and the creative power itself, that is beyond human understanding.39

The third major alternative Vedantic commentary is that of Madhva. His theory of *dvaita* (dualism) asserts a pragmatic realist view of phenomena as separate entities which are ‘bound to life by their actions and prisoners of the five elements’.40 Only right knowledge and self-surrender to Vishnu (as *Ishvara*) is the road to liberation, so that *maya*, for Madhva, is ‘the ignorance that produces pseudo-knowledge and especially evokes the idea of “I” and “mine”’.41

The devotional leaning expressed by the later works of Ramanuja and Madhva clearly take a secondary place in Shankara’s philosophy. Shankara’s interpretations of the early Vedic scriptures reflected the more austere, dispassionate elements displayed by Buddhist thought, which previously had gained such widespread acceptance, even dominance, throughout India. Buddhism and the less populist but still influential Jainism had emerged during the 6th century BCE. Buddhism was to engender enormous cultural wealth, as can be attested by the mass of literature that poured forth from its proponents, both secular and monastic, aided at some periods by the avid patronage of emperors and kings.

Over time, three main branches of Buddhism would arise within South Asia – the early monastic and austere Theravada gave way in popular embrace to the more devotional Mahayana and its offshoot, the esoteric Vajrayana with its ‘magical’ practices. The Buddha had originally followed the thought and practices of the

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39 Gonda, op. cit., p. 189.
40 Klostermaier, op. cit., p. 383.
41 Gonda, op. cit., p. 190.
Upanishadic sages and wandering ascetics, but rejected the latter’s extremism. He emphasised the ethical aspect of human development, and did not engage with the Vedic notion of ‘universal soul’ (*brahman*). In Buddhist thought, souls too must be subject to the constant state of flux that is the condition of the universe, and therefore are ultimately as insubstantial as all phenomena. Instead, the Buddha propounded the *dharma* (natural law) as that which is the underlying constancy and truth of life, though the later Mahayanists’ more positivist philosophy was that this *dharmakaya* (embodied law) was indeed the Absolute, as the essence of existence.\(^{42}\)

The Buddha’s teaching was centred on this: that all things and beings are impermanent and subject to change. The non-recogniton of this state is ignorance (*avidya*), which leads to craving or desire (*tanha*), which ends in suffering (*dukkha*). Freedom (*nirvana*, largely interchangeable with the Vedic *moksha*) would come with the elimination of desire for all that is impermanent – in other words, in becoming awakened to the trap of the *maya* world. This secondary reality, or transience, of the world is emphasised from the earliest Buddhist teachings, as is its sensuous lure, the Tempter, Mara, which is also Death. The world’s temptations, here named Mara, are frequently referred to elsewhere as *maya*, a ‘whore’.\(^{43}\) One of the earliest compilations of Buddhist thought, the *Dhammapada*, illustrates these *maya*-linked ideas, warning of both impermanence and temptation:

> Look upon the world as a bubble: look upon it as a mirage.  
> Him who looks thus upon the world the king of death does not see.  
> Come, look at this world resembling a painted royal chariot. The foolish are sunk in it; for the wise there is no attachment for it.  
> The wise are led out of this world, having conquered Mara and his hosts.\(^{44}\)

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\(^{43}\) For instance the poet Kabir uses this analogy of *maya* as whore, for, like a courtesan’s wiles, ‘the beauty and delights of the empirical world attract one and bind one to it, condemning one, through that bondage, to perpetual redeath …’ Lee Siegal, *Laughing Matters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987, p. 125.  
Again, in a well-known teaching on the deception of appearance, which has been attributed to the Buddha, the story is told of a group of blind men who, each feeling a different part of an elephant (an ear, a tail, a foot) believed the fragment they described explained the appearance of the whole animal, so that one believed it was round and stump-like, and another that it was thin as a whip. This story illustrates the need for recognition of that truth which is beyond the immediacy and the limits of the human senses alone, an image which is reiterated in the verse:

This world is blinded, few only can see here. Like birds escaped from the net a few go to heaven.\(^45\)

The later Madhyamika school of Mahayana Buddhism (2\(^{nd}\) century CE) under its founder, Nagarjuna, further emphasized the illusive and unsubstantial character of the \textit{maya} world. For Nagarjuna, unchanging truth was Emptiness, or the Void (\textit{Shunyata}). This was a doctrine of the \textit{Prajnaparamita} (Perfection of Wisdom) school of Mahayana, which in its \textit{Heart Sutra}, attributed to Nagarjuna, expresses the necessity to find truth behind form in its magical formula (\textit{mantra}) ‘Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, O what an awakening, all hail!’\(^46\) Nagarjuna allowed only a qualified reality to the phenomenal world. He taught that:

Like unto things magic-created, so are the deeds of sentient beings who take the external world for reality. The six paths of existence are in substance magic-creations, and they exist conditionally.

As a stupid child making a muddy pool is himself drowned in it, so are sentient beings drowned in the mire of false discrimination and unable to get out of it.\(^47\)

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
For some Mahayanists, the Buddha’s earthly manifestation, the Body of Magic Transformation (Nirmanakaya) is considered to be a representation, or emanation, of the transcendent Buddha, the Body of Essence (Dharmakaya). This Buddha of ultimate truth can equated to the form of brahman, or of the Prajnaparamita’s Emptiness (shunyata), or of the realisation of ‘no-self’ (anatta) that leads to the Theravadin’s nirvana.\(^4\) Such similar understanding, albeit under differing terminology, reveals the manner in which some central concepts could persist across orthodoxies in India. It is noteworthy too for the purposes of this study, that according to the quasi-historical accounts of his life, the Buddha as Siddhartha Gautama, the Nirmanakaya, was born of the Queen Maya.

Miraculous circumstances permeate the stories of the Buddha’s birth, such as that of his descent into the womb of Queen Maya as she dreamt that a white elephant had entered her side. Although Buddhism had never repudiated the supernatural, this element was becoming increasingly popular in India from the fifth century CE with the rise of the magico-religious cults of Tantricism, and the worship of feminine divinities.\(^4\) A magical principle is conspicuous in Hinduism; it can also be seen in the third major development of Buddhism, Vajrayana, which was to become its dominant form by the eighth century. Vajrayana (‘the diamond, or thunderbolt, way’) held to the importance of liberation from duhkha, but emphasised that ultimately nirvana and samsara were one and the same. Hence, the forces and things of the world (of samsara) were not to be discounted, but rather embraced as the means to enlightenment (nirvana).\(^5\) The necessary meeting of means (upaya) with wisdom (prajna) for the attainment of enlightenment was symbolised by the joining of masculine and feminine: sexual union.\(^5\) The themes so often reiterated in Indian thought – the goal of union with the Absolute, and the death inherent in remaining blind to the reality of this union (avidya, or maya) – are once again expressed in Tantric Buddhism:

They who do not see the truth

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\(^4\) Ibid., p. 189.
\(^5\) In different terminology, the world (maya) serves as a bridge to liberation (moksha).
\(^5\) Ibid., p. 191.
Think of birth-and-death as distinct from Nirvana,
But they who do see the truth
Think of neither…

This discrimination is the demon
Who produces the ocean of transmigration.
Freed from it the great ones are released
From the bonds of becoming.

And the means to freedom are spelt out:

The mystic duly dwells
On the manifold merits of his divinity,
He delights in thoughts of passion,
And by the enjoyment of his passion is set free.\(^{52}\)

Tantrism, both Buddhist and Hindu forms, with their life-and-death embracing rituals, became the predominant influence in Indian religion from around 900 to 1300 CE.\(^{53}\) Tantric principles lay behind the structure and the voluptuous adornment of the many temples built during this ‘golden age’, such as those of Khajuraho and Konarak, and a general epithet given to several important Tantric shrines (pithas) is Mayavati, ‘full of Maya’\(^{54}\). Tantric thought produced the visual and auditory magical symbols yantras and mantras, and developed yogas that are still much associated with Hindu and Buddhist practice. These yogas of awareness concentrated on experiences ranging from sexuality to intent focus on breathing and vision. They embraced physical practices that aimed for extremes of pleasure or bodily perfection, divine rather than merely human, which would unleash realisation of the primeval energy and its genesis, that which has been variously named Kali/Mahakala, Shakti/Shiva, and is Maya/Brahman. Tantric engagement with the senses and passions, with magic and power, was focused by dedication to the Absolute in whichever form it may take.

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\(^{52}\) From Cittavisuddhiprakarana, pp. 24-38, in de Bary, ibid, p. 195-196.
\(^{53}\) Heehs, op. cit., p. 194.
Most commonly, the form was that of the Gods Shiva or Vishnu, or of the Goddess Shakti (also called Devi, Mahamaya, Durga, Parvati and other names). In the *Kirana Tantra*, Shiva explains *maya* to Garuda, the winged vehicle of Vishnu:

... Because of the effect (of *maya*) which is the division of time he (the soul) is deluded in experience by (the *tattva* of) time. Thus bound with the *tattva*-elements the (soul that is) naturally enveloped (becomes) partially equipped of knowledge, linked to a (gross) body, embraced by experience (generated out) of *maya* and (thus) absorbed by that (*maya*).

The desire for union with the Absolute and the engagement with the passions that had been sought in Tantra merge into the *bhakti* cults which, through the wanderings of itinerant poet-saints, were carried throughout the country from their origins in the South from around the 6th century. The devotionalism of *bhakti* is the form most often followed in modern theistic Hinduism, yet the principles and symbolic forms of *tantra* continue to underlie its rituals and iconography. The path of *bhakti* focused on the adoration of *avatars* (incarnations) of the *Ishvara*, the personal form of God. Union with the beloved God necessitates the tearing away the illusory veil of separation – overcoming *maya*.

*Bhakti* saints and teachers sang poems of that desired union, and retold variations of the well-known stories of the Gods from *Epic* and *Puranic* sources, such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. These mythologies had developed over many centuries from the earliest Vedic times. Not only have they formed the basis of popular Hinduism, but have contributed undoubtedly the greatest influence on Indian cultural literacy altogether. The great mythologies create a bridge of continuity between the ancient authority of the Vedas and current forms of popular Hinduism – the *Mahabharata* itself is often referred to as the ‘Fifth Veda’.

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55 Heehs, op. cit., p. 195.
56 *Tattva* – reality, element, principle.
57 Dominic Goodall (trans.), *Kirana Tantra*, in Heehs, op. cit., p.196.
and mythologies, and being ever reworked in accordance with regional variations and the imagination and memory of individual storytellers. The mythologies were rendered visible in temple sculpture, painting, theatre, and dance. They form the irrefutable link which, despite differences of belief and ritual in the many cults of Hinduism, creates common ground in the telling of these much-loved ancient tales of divine and human conditions, of the nature of the world and its powers, and of liberation from its constraints. Within the Puranas and the Epics, and the bhakti aphorisms, sutras and poetry, the teaching of maya persists, repeating its explanatory place in Indian cosmogony and philosophy which serves as an explanation of the human and divine world.

In bhakti, the Puranas and the Epics, as in the Rig Veda, maya is often expressed as transformative power, the ability to change self or the surrounding world. Each of the most prominent Gods, the Mahadevas (Vishnu, Shiva) and the Mahadevi (the Goddess) are known by many names, representing the multifarious aspects or qualities in which they manifest. Vishnu, for instance, is known for his transformative appearances in the world as a series of avatars, or incarnations, the most popular of which are Krishna and Rama. These manifestations in quasi-human, divine or animal form disguise his true nature as brahman, both with and without characteristics (Saguna and Nirguna). Vishnu’s avatars enable him to act to sustain the world and its creatures, protecting them against dharma-destroying demons. Hence Vishnu is known as ‘the preserver’, appearing in changing shape to suit the needs of the time.

A famous story of Vishnu’s maya appears in several Puranas and in the Ramayana. It relates that Vishnu had ordered the churning of the milky ocean of existence to release the nectar of good fortune, while he, in the form of Kurma, the tortoise, supported the world on his back. Other blessings of the world such as sacred cows, the celestial nymphs (Apsarasas) and the goddess Lakshmi were released from

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59 Vishnu’s avatars are Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the tortoise), Varaha (the boar), Narasimha (the man-lion), Vamana (the dwarf), Parashurama (Rama with the Axe), Rama (the perfect man), Krishna (the philosopher king), the Buddha, and the future avatar, Kalki (the final destroyer).
that ocean too. Vishnu then arose as Dhanvantari, the proclaimer of the Ayurveda, holding a jar filled with nectar. Later, taking the form of a beautiful woman, Mohini, Vishnu seduced the demons (Daityas) into relinquishing the nectar, which they had stolen. Then:

‘So be it,’ said Vishnu with all the immortals as he left the woman’s body. Then when Hara said ‘Show it to me!’ lord Hari exhibited his female form to Rudra. Fooled by this trick and abandoning Gauri, Sambhu went after the woman. Naked and crazy looking, he grabbed the woman’s hair. She shook herself loose and fled, with Hara in pursuit. Wherever Hara’s semen spilled on the earth there appeared a sacred place of lingas which are as good as gold. After Hara had recognised her to be an illusion and had resumed his own form, Hari said to Shiva, ‘Rudra, you have seen through my deception. There is no other person on earth but you who can conquer it!’ Then the Daityas who had been deprived of the nectar were felled by the gods in battle and the deities went to live in heaven. Whoever recites this story will also go to heaven.

This purana not only illustrates Vishnu’s maya as transformative power and as illusion, but presents listeners (or readers or viewers, depending on the form of presentation of the story) with an idea of the varying names or qualities the Gods may don. Vishnu is Hari, Kurma, Dhanvantari, Mohini; Shiva is Hara, Rudra, Sambhu. Appearances change as each turn of events or each mood unfolds, as fleeting and reactive as the changing shape of clouds. But other tales are explicit illustrations of maya. One of the best known of these is the lesson given by Vishnu to the seer Narada.

Narada had gained Vishnu’s favour, and was granted fulfilment of a wish. Narada prayed, ‘Show me the magic power of your Maya’, and Vishnu promised to do so. But first he requested that Narada fetch water from a nearby village to quench their

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60 The traditional science of medicine.
thirst. Narada did so, and, entering the first dwelling he came to, was met by a beautiful woman, who welcomed him in. Forgetting what he had come for, Narada stayed with the family, married the woman, and became a householder with children and fields. Many summers passed, until one year the rains fell in torrents and the village was washed away. Holding his children on his shoulders, Narada staggered through the swirling waters in the dark night— but he slipped, his children were swept away, and his wife lost to the flood too. Narada himself was flung into the roaring river, and awoke the next day stranded on a rise, devastated by his loss. Suddenly he heard a familiar voice saying, ‘Where have you been? You went to fetch the water more than half an hour ago.’ Narada looked around. The floodwater was no longer there, and Vishnu stood nearby asking, ‘Now do you understand the secret of my Maya?’

Here, life is shown to be a dreamlike, passing show. Maya is the spell of creation that casts a web of forgetfulness— even time and death are part of its illusion. Vishnu’s maya is the fascinating created world with all its attributes, material and emotional. The totality of life is contained herein, only to pass away as if it had never been, yet returning again to the beginning, which is also the ending. This circular pattern of time is an integral element of samsara, the wheel of life.

A beloved form of Vishnu is Krishna, who appears variously as adorable child, as lover, and as warrior, both human and God. The source of the Krishna tales is the great epic, the Mahabharata, but it is in a selection from this, the Bhagavad-Gita (the ‘Song of God’), and in the Bhagavata Purana, which are among the most popular religious books in India, that the teachings of Krishna are most fully expressed. The Bhagavad-Gita relates the guidance given by the hero God Krishna to his warrior friend Arjuna, who hesitates in an agony of doubt at the threshold of an apocalyptic battle against his own kin. Krishna describes (and displays) to Arjuna the nature of God and the ways in which consciousness of God may be attained. He tells Arjuna that worldly identities are maya, illusion; that the true nature of humanity is atman— or brahman, for brahman is everything, and pervades everything. Krishna is

brahman, the essence of life. He says ‘In this whole vast universe there is nothing higher than I. All the worlds have their rest in me, as many pearls upon a string.’ (7:7).63

But brahman/Krishna is the maya that is deception, too:

My mysterious cloud of appearance is hard to pass beyond; but those who in truth come to me go beyond the world of shadows. But men who do evil seek not me: their soul is darkened by delusion. Their vision is veiled by the cloud of appearance; their heart has chosen the path of evil (7:14-15).64

And (7:25):

... my glory is not seen by all: I am hidden by my veil of mystery (yogamaya); and in its delusion the world knows me not, who was never born and forever I am.

Yet Krishna, though ‘never born’, appears in the world as an avatar:

Although I am unborn, everlasting, and I am the Lord of all, I come to my realm of nature and through my wondrous power (atmamayaya) I am born.’ (4:6)65

Krishna then reveals himself as God’s infinite power and beauty to an overwhelmed Arjuna (as too, in a Puranic tale, the baby Krishna’s mother beholds the universe in his open mouth, and realises the true nature of reality – that ‘the rest of her life is an illusion’66). Having explained by word and deed the nature of the divine, he then goes on to explain the nature of the world and the qualities needed to attain

64 Ibid., p. 76.
65 Ibid., p. 61.
enlightenment within it. He emphasises that it is necessary to remember the true nature of atman/brahman continually, avoiding the trap of *maya*. For instance, the sacred fig tree is a metaphor for the *maya* world. Its branches spread and take root, creating new trunks ‘like the Spirit branching down into the material realm and taking embodiment’\(^{67}\). Krishna warns that:

> Men do not see the changing form of that tree, nor its beginning, nor its end, nor where its roots are. But let the wise see, and with the strong sword of dispassion let him cut this strong-rooted tree, and seek that path wherefrom those who go never return. (15:3-4)\(^{68}\)

The *Gita* paints Krishna as philosopher; in other incarnations and other stages of life he is equally revered. Krishna’s miraculous power (and Godly nature) is frequently demonstrated during his adventures with Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*. In one such episode the friends meet the Ashura named Maya, who proclaims himself a ‘great artist’ and offers to build them a glorious palace.\(^{69}\) Its exquisite form is redolent of all the world’s beauty; so lovely in fact that Arjuna thinks it hardly seems real, and asks, ‘Is it not an illusion, Maya?’ to which Maya makes the characteristically evasive reply, ‘I don’t know…my aches and pains are gone, like a cloud disappearing from across the face of the moon. Now if the palace vanished also, what could I say?’ Arjuna wonders if the palace is dangerous, and Krishna laughingly warns that ‘Maya mixes his blessings’, just before he himself crashes into a door of clear crystal, then pushes at another door that is suddenly not there, and falls through to the floor. Later, Arjuna’s cousin and rival Duryodhana comes to visit Arjuna and his brother Yudhishthira in the palace of Maya, and he steps into a pool with water so still and clear it appears not to be there. Discomposed, he attempts to avoid another apparent stream, only to stub his toe on the hard crystal masquerading as water, complete with glass fish and glass waterlilies to aid the deception. Feeling mocked by this trickery, Duryodhana then demands a game of dice as a retaliatory challenge, and it is that game which leads to war between the cousins.

\(^{67}\) Barbara Powell, op. cit., p. 70.
\(^{68}\) Mascaro, *Bhagavad Gita*, op. cit., p. 106.
The deception of maya is then the seed of the great war of which the Mahabharata tells. And it is in the following story of the game of dice that the maya of Krishna’s miraculous power is demonstrated again. The heroine Draupadi, wife of Arjuna and his brothers, is forfeit in this game of dice, and is ordered by her new captors to strip off her garments. In desperation, she prays to Krishna to preserve her from this final humiliation, and he intervenes by creating for her an infinite sari, which, no matter how often it is unwound, never reaches its end.

The Mahabharata often foretells Krishna’s divinity, but it is in the Bhagavata Purana that the devotional path to Krishna is more fully emphasised, with its central tenet being the remembrance of the eternal nature of God, as opposed to the ephemeral world of maya. Noting the importance of this view, Barbara Powell comments:

This seemingly simple premise is explored in the most painstaking detail and from a kaleidoscopic range of angles. We see it illustrated in the life stories of saints, seers and devotee-kings. We see it justified through extensive metaphysical and philosophical analyses, as well as through elaborate accounts of the process of creation and cosmic dissolution. We see it substantiated through practical instructions on how to do it ourselves, how to realize the Absolute through time-tested spiritual exercises.\(^{70}\)

Recounted through the eighteen thousand stanzas of the Bhagavata Purana are the tales of Krishna’s many incarnations, including those depicting him as the mischievous cowherd child, and as the maddeningly desirable lover of the gopis, the female cowherds. This aspect of Krishna was fully developed in the 11th century poet Jayadeva’s lyrical drama the Gitagovinda, which would from then on serve as theme and inspiration for Krishna devotees. Here, it is said, the symbolism is clear: the dark blue complexion of Krishna represents the sky, and infinity; the gopis are the souls

\(^{70}\) Barbara Powell, op. cit., p. 253.
seeking God, and the village of Vrindavan is symbol of the human mind, where the Deity meets and converses with his worshippers.\textsuperscript{71} This evocative symbolism so prevalent across the spectrum of Indian religious culture is an attractive device, which not only entertains and delights but is a constant reminder of the nature of God in whichever form It may take. Krishna, as the God of love is undoubtedly a favourite amongst Vishnu’s incarnations, but another, equally revered, is Rama (Ram).

Rama, hero of the Epic \textit{Ramayana}, epitomises the perfection of manhood and the perfection of \textit{dharma}. This most popular of stories is often presented as \textit{Ramlila} – God’s play. Events are enacted to instruct, enchant, and inspire the devotee; as Powell reminds us, it is \textit{maya} to forget that ‘for the Divine, all actions in this world are mere play, frolic, a dance’.\textsuperscript{72} One of the famous episodes of this story relates the manner in which both Sita and Rama were deceived by the \textit{maya} of the demon Maricha, who transformed himself into a beautiful golden deer. Although Rama’s brother Lakshmana warns ‘There is no such deer on earth. That is an illusion’, Sita encourages Rama to capture the deer and Rama allows himself to be lured away on a hunt. Too late he realises his folly, when the deer, pierced by Rama’s arrow and dying, calls out for help in Rama’s voice. Despite Lakshmana’s warning her again of treachery, telling her that the voice was false, Sita foolishly urges him to go to Rama’s aid, and leaving her in the protection of a magic circle he reluctantly does so. But yet again Sita is deluded (\textit{mayamoha}). The demon Ravana appears in the guise of a brahman, and Sita steps outside her protective circle to greet him. Ravana drops his disguise, snatches Sita up and flies away with her in his chariot.\textsuperscript{73} From Sita’s abduction the story unfolds of her rescue by Rama and his allies (including the monkey king, Hanuman, famous for his magic feats of transformation, and thereafter a deity in his own right). Equally a magus in his transformative persona is Shiva, Vishnu’s cohort in the trimurti (or trinity) of great Hindu Gods.

While Vishnu’s role is as the preserver of life and of \textit{dharma}, Shiva’s is as the destroyer and liberator. As Nataraj, his joyous dance brings creation into being, and

\textsuperscript{72} Powell, op. cit., p. 380.
his wild trampling dance of death is the doorway to life born anew. In this manner, he is the supreme liberator releasing the world from ignorance. Conversely, as the purveyor of life and death he is thus the source of universal illusion – the world of *maya*, for like Vishnu, Shiva presents different faces. It is, in fact, a trait characteristic of Shiva that he presents two seemingly contradictory personas. As Ardhanarishvara he is half male, half female, Shiva/Shakti. Shiva is both fearsome and auspicious, both a family man and an unrepentant, unpredictable outsider. He is associated with the apparently opposing emblems of the phallic *lingam* and the meditative symbol *Om*: he represents asceticism, and yet is renowned for his rampant sexuality. Following this pattern of contradiction, Shiva is associated with Kama, the God of love, and yet he is named ‘Kamaghna’, slayer of Kama.74 In the *Purana Siva Uma* (4.11-39) the connections of lust with Shiva’s *maya* are made plain:

His supreme divine *maya* is all pervasive, O seer. The whole world with its gods, demons and people, is situated in him. Everyone alike, whether he be a hero, a Visnu, another deity, or a valiant man, is smitten by the mind-born Kama, his special attendant. Hari was deluded by desire, by the majesty of Siva’s illusion, O lordly seer, when he molested the wives of others. Indra, lord of the thirty gods, was fascinated by Gautama’s wife...even Fire, most excellent in the world, was fooled by Siva’s *maya*; because of his pride he was overcome by lust, but Siva extricated him from it.75

In the Purana containing the above extract, there follows a long list of seers, Gods, men and demons who have alike been ensnared by Shiva’s *maya* in the form of sexual desire. It also tells of the outcomes of succumbing to these lusts, the resulting births, quarrels, regrets, punishments, and resurrections. Such a piece illustrates many purposes in a puranic tale: mytho-historical continuity, ethics, theology, and this particular story restates the adage that ‘Shiva consists of everything’. In this intriguing passage it appears there is no delineation of ‘right and wrong’, as various outcomes arise from these ‘lustful delusions’. In the philosophy of the Indian

74 Dimmit & van Buitenen, op. cit., p. 149.
75 Ibid., p. 212.
religions desire is after all, both physically and metaphysically, the cause of creation and its shackle. In this way, desire is *maya*.

And Maya is one of the names of the Goddess, for those devotees whose focus of worship is the feminine principle. Here, it is She who is ‘everything’. The many names and guises of the Goddess (who has, amongst other appellations, Mahamaya, Mahadeva, or Shakti) include the consorts of Shiva, Vishnu and the remaining God of the *trimurti*, Brahma. It has not been unusual to find the female incarnations viewed as the fundamental force of the cosmos, the Absolute, whether in the particular guise of Uma, Parvati, Kali, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati or any of the many others. In an declaration of herself as the Absolute, Uma exclaims, ‘I am truly Brahman!’ She speaks as the *Mahamaya*, saying:

> There is no-one higher than I. Formless yet possessing form, consisting of all the reals, with undefinable attributes, eternal, consisting of both causes and effects, sometimes taking the form of a lovely woman, sometimes of a man, sometimes both, I am the goddess who assumes all forms ... As a magician makes a wooden puppet dance, so do I, the goddess, make all creatures act. Wind blows, fire burns and the world-protectors do their duty wholly out of awe of me ... \(^77\)

Many myths tell of the origin of the Goddess and of her deeds. She is often depicted as a mighty warrior, battling hordes of demons in bloody warfare, her face serenely detached from the world’s *maya*, assisted by an army created from her breath. As Durga, riding on the strength of her mount, the lion, she destroys the dreadful buffalo demon, though he changes shape many times to evade her. She appears in many other aspects – as Candika, Ambika, Durga, Kali, as Parvati or Lakshmi; sometimes she takes the guise of legendary human females, such as Sita or Radha. The *Markandeya Devimahatmya* concludes that ‘In such a way, then, does the divine goddess, although eternal, take birth again and again to protect creation. The

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\(^76\) Brahma, although still acknowledged in his role as Creator to Vishnu’s Preserver and Shiva’s Destroyer, did not maintain a wide devotional following, and will not be included in the broad overview this thesis takes of *maya* in classical Hindu thought.

\(^77\) ‘Siva Uma Purana’ 49. 1-43, ibid, p. 228.
world is deluded by her, it is begotten by her, it is she who gives knowledge when prayed to and prosperity when pleased. Elsewhere, the Goddess is equated with *prakriti* (original matter), which too, as described above, is *maya*.

In an explanation of the origin, relationships and meaning of the Shiva/Shakti, the *Kurma Purana* spells out the notion of Shiva as Kala (time) and his *shakti* (creative energy) as Maya:

> His *shakti*, or energy, progenitrix of the entire universe, is known as Maya (Illusion). By her the lord Purusottama causes the whole world to err. Shakti, namely Maya, who takes on all forms, is eternal and illuminates everywhere the omiform nature of Mahesa.

Yet images of the Goddess depict, as starkly as do those of Shiva, the duality that exists within her essential ‘omiform nature’. The Goddess can be fierce and devouring, as drawn in the blood-dripping Kali, or redolent of abundance and promise, as is lotus-eyed Lakshmi, purveyor of riches. In this disparity the nature of the world is reflected. The *Srimad Devi Bhagavatham* (‘Song of the Goddess’) is explicit in listing the association of ‘Maya’ with other terms for the Goddess. Although the following lines are fragments taken out of context, the purpose of citing them is to provide a sketch from within an otherwise immense explanation, which is clearly influenced by Shankara’s school of *advaita vedanta*:

> The Devi said ‘Oh Giriraja! This whole universe, moving and unmoving, is created by My Maya Sakti. This Maya is conceived in me. It is not, in reality, different or separate from Me... Really it is Maya that differentiates into men, beasts and other Jivas, and it is Maya that differentiates into Brahma, Visnu and other Isvaras... I am Nirguna. And when I am united with my Sakti, Maya, I become Saguns, the Great cause

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78 'Markandeya Purana' 89,29-37, ibid, p. 239. 79 Commentary on Brahmakaivarta-Purana, in Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature* Vol. 1, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1972, p. 568. 80 'Kurma Purana' 1.11.1-47, 63-75, 211-220, 326, Dimmit & van Buitenen, op. cit., p. 230; ‘Mahesa’ is another name for lord Shiva; ‘Purusottama’ is also the supreme person, and relates to *purusha*, consciousness.
of this world. This Maya is divided into two, Vidya and Avidya. Avidya
Maya hides Me; whereas Vidya Maya does not. Avidya creates whereas
Vidya Maya liberates. 81

Alongside such philosophical portraits of the Goddess, the biographical vignettes
and instructional anecdotes of the tantric and Puranic texts, individual bhaktas the
length and breadth of the country contributed their visions and guidance to the
religious history of the populace. Their common goal remained the attainment of the
knowledge of brahman, in whichever form it/he/she may be worshipped, and the
accompanying necessary recognition of the condition of life which is maya. From the
grassroots to all levels of society in India, their influence often crossing religious
divides, bhakti saints and teachers continued to develop and share the teachings of
devotion to a God which is seen as Nirguna by some, and as Saguna by others. This
difference of belief has led to contention over the idea of maya, as proponents of the
differing ideologies debated (and continue to debate) the idea of creation as illusion,
and the associated dispute as to the ultimacy of the Ishvara (the personal God or
Saguna Brahman) or the Nirguna Brahman. But in either view, the idea of maya is
present, as attested by the bhakti poets. The words of 12th century South Indian
Shaivite devotee Mahadeviyakka continue to be revered. A poem typical of her
yearning for union with her God pleads:

Like a silkworm weaving
Her house with love
From her marrow, and dying
In her body’s threads
Winding tight, round
And round,
I burn
Desiring what the heart desires.

81 The Devi Gita (Song of the Goddess), chapters XXX11 and XXX111, pp. 711-714. Excerpts from the
‘Srimad Devi Bhagavatam’, Swami Visvananda (translator), Sacred Books of the Hindus, Vol. 26, Book 7,
Cut through, O lord,
My heart’s greed,
And show me
Your way out.
O lord white as jasmine.\(^82\)

In a footnote to this poem its translator, the linguist A. K. Ramanujan states that, ‘The spider and its web-house of illusions is an ancient Indian image for Maya or illusion. Here Akka appropriately changes the spider into a silkworm.’\(^83\) Elsewhere too Mahadeviyakka begs Shiva to cut through her illusions, while yet she claims, perhaps both in despair and admiration:

With stick raised high, Illusion herds
the worlds.
Lord white as jasmine
No-one can overcome
Your Illusion.\(^84\)

From the 7\(^{th}\) to 10\(^{th}\) centuries, Vaishnava devotees, the alvar saints (‘those who are immersed or drowned in devotion’\(^85\)) repeated ideas and sentiments familiar from early Hindu scriptures and which continued to descry maya in its different forms. Songs of Andal are still sung; she pleas ‘I yearn for him who once measured the worlds’\(^86\). Nammalvar, a male who often wrote in the voice of a woman, was known for lamentation of the maya, the deception and evasiveness, of her Lord: ‘Don’t tell us those lies, heaven and earth know your tricks’.\(^87\) And the famous bhakti poet Surdas, a 16\(^{th}\) century devotee of Krishna from northern India, sang of the delusion that is maya:

\(^{83}\) Ibid., p. 194.
\(^{84}\) ‘No. 26’, ibid, p. 118.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 313.
\(^{87}\) Ibid., p. 315.
Until you wake up to who you really are
You’ll be like the man who searches the whole jungle
For a jewel that hangs at his throat.88

Another 16th century bhakti poet-saint is Mira Bai, a Rajasthani chieftain’s daughter who became a wandering ascetic. A song to Krishna proclaims her discernment of maya in her knowledge of Oneness, and the illusion of the ephemeral world:

Thou and I are one,
Like the sun and its heat...
O my companion,
Worldly comfort is an illusion
As soon as you get it, it goes.
I have chosen the Indestructible for my refuge,
Him whom the snake of death
Will not devour.89

The bhakti poets disseminated their perceptions and linked all levels of the community through their vacanas (poetry). They appealed to ordinary uneducated people by, as A. K. Ramanujan explains, employing:

... stock phrases, proverbs, and religious commonplaces of the time. This stock, shared by Southern and Northern saints, the Upanisads and the folk alike, included figures, symbols and paradoxes often drawn from an ancient and pan-Indian pool of symbology. Bhakti saints, like the vacanakaras, have been called the ‘great integrators’, bringing the high to the low, esoteric paradox to the man in the street, transmuting ancient and

88 Ibid., p. 349.
89 Ibid., p. 351.
abstruse ideas into live contemporary experiences; at the same time, finding everyday symbols for the timeless.\textsuperscript{90}

It was not only ‘high’ and ‘low’ religious ideas that were interchanged; devotionalist poets also crossed the boundaries between religions. One of the best – known of these was the poet Kabir (1440-1508). Kabir, whose verses and teachings were still followed in the twentieth century by influential Indian figures such as Rabindranath Tagore and remain revered by many in the general populace, was said to have been a low caste weaver, raised by a poor Muslim family in the holy Hindu city of Varanasi. This background is reflected in his works, which contain an intermingling of influences, with words from both the Sanskrit and Persian, and with recognisable Sufi, Buddhist, Vedic, and Tantric elements. Kabir calls God by many names – such as Ram, Allah, Nirguna, Sunya – which reflects his lack of affiliation with any particular school, sect or religion.\textsuperscript{91} In one of his poems, Kabir personifies \textit{maya} as a deceitful woman:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{Maya}

We know
What Maya is –
The great con-woman,
A companion to con-men.

She wanders all over the world
With her threefold noose,
she sits rocking in each place
using a sweet tongue.

At Kesava’s place
She masquerades as Kamala,
\end{quote}


In Siva’s mansion
She’s Bhavani.

She has settled down
At the priests’s
As an idol,
She has become the holy water
At the pilgrim’s destination.

She has planned herself
At the ascetic’s
As an ascetic woman,
In the king’s palace
She sits on the throne
As a queen.

In some homes
She’s diamond and pearl,
In some she has become
A worthless cowrie shell.

She has moved in
With the common devotee
And become a devotee herself,
She lives with the Muslim man
As his Muslim woman.

Kabir says, listen,
O holy men –
This is the whole
In this piece, Kabir has depicted, with humorous irony, the all-pervasive, insinuating and everyday quality of maya, and at the same time he has pulled the guise of sanctity from revered symbols, such as ‘idols’ and ‘holy water’. The ritual these symbols are part of is maya too; all that counts, Kabir teaches, is the selfless acknowledgement and sharing of God’s blissful love, so that ‘the heart partakes of the joy of the Infinite Sea’. Different traditions, both textual and oral, that followed or were influenced by the teachings of Kabir have developed and remain alive across the subcontinent. One of the most prominent of these is Sikhism, whose holy book the Guru Granth Sahib includes poems attributed to Kabir.

The founder of the Sikh religion in the 16th century, Guru Nanak, was strongly influenced by Kabir’s brand of syncretistic devotionalism. Born a Kshatriya (the ruling, warrior class of ‘twice-born’ Hindu) during the era of Muslim supremacy, he learnt Persian at an early age and was therefore acquainted with the language of Sufism, an esoteric branch of devotional Islam that had been eagerly received throughout north India. Nanak frequented both Hindu and Muslim shrines, and gathered his own disciples within the umbrella of his belief that God was omnipresent, eternally hidden within the human heart. In common with other devotionalists Nanak recognised that this concealment was due to maya, the materialist craving for things of the senses (or ‘mammon’, as collator and translator of Nanak’s hymns, M. A. Macauliffe helpfully describes it). Maya was not, for Nanak, the ultimate unreality of the world, but the delusory quality of the world’s values. He pleaded with true bhakti yearning that:

This body of mine is steeped in illusion,
The clothes I wear are dyed with greed.
My Beloved does not like my dress,
How then can this bride enter the nuptial bed? 98

In order to avoid being ensnared by the world of transient desire (maya), remembrance of God was accentuated in Sikh hymns, and the mediation of the guru, who could deliver God’s grace, was ever sought in this doctrine that sought to go beyond that of both Islam and Hinduism. Despite later developments and embellishments of Sikhism, such as its now distinctive external symbols of identity, its martial traditions and strict codes of discipline, devotionalism remains at its core.

One of the most influential purveyors of the devotional message across India had for many centuries been the aforementioned Sufis, the wandering saints of esoteric Islam. The influences of great Islamic theorists and poets such as Ibn el-Arabi, al-Ghazali and the master poet Rumi had spread throughout the Muslim world and became increasingly established in India from the 11th century, through the words of individual Sufi teachers (pirs) and later, through established orders that gathered avid followers. Hindu mystical traditions became integrated into Indian Sufism, or conversely, as some have argued, Sufi influence was so directional in India that it may have informed even the Vedantic interpretations of Shankara and Ramanuja, and ideas of bhakti teachers such as Basava. 99 Certainly, the Sufis and the bhaktas ‘often joined common cause’ blurring the boundaries of Muslim and Hindu doctrine. 100 Sufi teachings became widely popular, revitalizing Islam for many Muslims, and appealing to lower caste Hindus too; Sufi ascetic, world-denying practices were very similar to those of yogis and the bhakti renunciants. Similarities are clear between the ideal of fana (loss of self in God) that was the hallmark of Sufism, and the rapture of unity with the beloved sought by bhaktis. Both refuted intellectualism in favour of direct experience of God; the extinction of egocentricity that is the maya of separation. Typifying – and indeed leading – this line of Sufi thought, Rumi wrote:

98 Heehs, op. cit., p. 382.
This place is a dream
Only a sleeper considers it real.
Then death comes like dawn,
And you wake up laughing
At what you thought was your grief.

But there’s a difference with this dream.
Everything cruel and unconscious
Done in the illusion of the present world,
All that does not fade away at the death-waking.
It stays,
And it must be interpreted.

... And this groggy time we live in
this is what it’s like:
A man goes to sleep in the town
Where he has always lived, and he dreams he’s living
In another town.
In the dream, he doesn’t remember
The town he’s sleeping in his bed in. He believes
The reality of the dream town.
The world is that kind of sleep.

... and though we seem to be sleeping
there is an inner wakefulness
that directs the dream
and that will eventually startle us back
to the truth of who we are.101

Sleep, dream and wakefulness, lifting of the veil, and melting into the infinite ocean were amongst the metaphors commonly found in Sufism to express the search

for fana, true reality with God. These are the type of metaphors also found throughout Hindu thought to express \textit{maya}; but another aspect of \textit{maya}, apart from its web-like or veil-like illusion, was growing increasingly prevalent in medieval India. The cult of the guru was emerging. Sufi \textit{pirs} and Hindu \textit{bhakti} saints alike came to be seen as conduits to God, stepping into the power vacuum left by the spurned brahmins. Accompanying these figures of power was an increasing emphasis on miraculous events, enactments of magic ability, with which the notion of \textit{maya} became ever more associated. The enormous role that the idea of the miraculous was to play in the portrayal of India as ‘the mysterious East’ and as a repository of the exotic and the irrational, will be addressed later in the thesis\textsuperscript{102}. Another arena of power in Indian life absorbed the idea of \textit{maya} too – the socio-political world.

In Indian classical literature \textit{maya} as change, trickery, and power plays a large part in the interactions of Gods, demons, and men and, in the philosophical and devotional understanding of the universe, it is the mask of appearance. So, too, these aspects of \textit{maya} were included in formulas to be followed in governance, diplomacy and warfare. Evidence for this influence may be found throughout the \textit{Mahabharata}, and in the detailed compendium on statecraft, the \textit{Arthashastra}, the ‘Science of Material Gain’, which has been attributed to emperor Chandragupta’s chief minister, Kautilya, and completed perhaps around 250 C.E.\textsuperscript{103} In both texts it is discernible that a factor overriding kingly or warrior ethics was the necessity to be the victor.

Winning mattered, for although the king’s role was the upholding of \textit{dharma}, as is so often reiterated and lauded in the Epics and Puranas, the goals of life – \textit{artha}, \textit{kama}, \textit{dharma} and \textit{moksha} – were all in reality dependent on \textit{artha}, the worldly means without which other goals could not be addressed at all.\textsuperscript{104} Hindu thought was above all immensely practical and logical. And winning mattered, not only for the \textit{kshatriya}’s goal of protecting one’s people and territory, but also because of the awareness that the battleground of life is, ultimately, God’s play, \textit{lila}. The

\textsuperscript{102} See Chapter 6.
\textsuperscript{103} The exact authorship and dates of the ‘Arthashastra’ have proved difficult to establish. according to Stanley Wolpert’s report of the work of Thomas Trautmann. See Stanley Wolpert, \textit{A New History of India}, 5\textsuperscript{th} edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, p. 57.
consciousness of the world as lila could lead to the allied realisation that the final outcome must be God’s, beyond human dharma. Yet each human must play his/her role on this earthly stage to the best of their ability, bearing in mind that becoming (towards perfection) was life’s purpose. Ethics counted immensely in this worldview, and correct behaviour was detailed to a minute degree. But in the end, ethics belong to the world of time and definition that is maya. Consequently (or purely pragmatically) ever-present worldly dangers and threats must be dealt with by means fair or foul, according to the Arthashastra.

Amongst other instructions, Kautilya set out seven techniques to use in ruling a kingdom, or to ‘greet a neighbour’. They consisted of Sama (conciliation, gentle persuasion); Danda (military might, punishment); Dana (bribery, gift-giving, a share of the spoils); Bheda (sowing dissension, the scheme of divide-and-conquer), Maya (deceit, illusion, fraudulent diplomacy); Upeka (overlooking or ignoring the situation until a more favourable time); Indrajala (‘military Maya’ – creating an appearance of greater power than is actually available). From those points, it is clear to see that deception was not only acceptable but recommended, as is shown too by the following sample of the crafty advice given for testing the purity or impurity of one’s ministers:

One minister should get all the other ministers to sail with him on a ship, and the king, becoming anxious about this, should arrest them all. Another man should be there in prison, pretending to have been arrested already, and he should approach them, now that they have been stripped of their money and their honour, and whisper to them, one by one, ‘This king has set out to do a very bad thing. Very well. Let’s kill him and set up another king in his place. This suits all of us; what about you?’ If anyone refuses, he is pure. This is the temptation of fear...Those who prove to be pure after the temptation of fear should be used as the king’s bodyguards.

The sort of trickery recommended by Kautilya is also found, surprisingly, being used by the noble figures Krishna and Arjuna to win the great battle of Kurukshetra for the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*. As seen above in examples from the Vedas on, it has been a common theme in battles between the Gods that deception, disguise, sleight-of-hand is an unquestioned part of the fray, even an admired aspect. Krishna himself is now popularly renowned as a trickster, from his youthful pranks with butter-stealing and teasing of the *gopis*. But here he has (in the *Bhagavad Gita*) been teaching Arjuna the importance of ethics, of *dharma*, so it is seemingly contradictory to find this God and his hero winning by duplicity and by, apparently, flouting the warrior code.\textsuperscript{107} Yet inclusion of contradictory elements and alternative teaching methods is a essential part of the realism inherent in Hindu thought, and this instance exemplifies the sweeping assertion that both prefaces and concludes the *Mahabharata*: ‘Whatever is here concerning the four aims of mankind may be found elsewhere, but what is absent from here does not exist anywhere’.\textsuperscript{108} All possibilities are included; right and wrong are not, after all, so easily defined (especially in the present degenerative age of the *Kaliyuga*, where *dharma* and *adharma* become ambiguous).\textsuperscript{109} The leader of the Pandava clan in the Epic, Yudhishthira, worries about the discrepancy, saying ‘Righteous behaviour (*dharma*<sub>charya</sub>) and kingdom are continually at odds, by which my mind is confused’.\textsuperscript{110} (*Mh.* XLI.38.4.) This thesis is not directly concerned with examining *dharma* except to demonstrate the manner in which *dharma* and *maya* are connected or not connected, and are mutually definitive. *Mh.* XII. 110. 26 demonstrates the flexible nature of *dharma* and its conditioning by *maya*:

\begin{quote}
In whatever way a person acts, so should he be treated; that is *dharma*. One practicing artifice (*mayacharah*) should be treated with artifice. One practicing goodness should be met with goodness.\textsuperscript{111}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{107} A full discussion of the juxtaposition of deceit and *dharma* can be found in Ruth Cecily Katz, *Arjuna in the Mahabharata: Where Krishna Is, There Is Victory*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, 1989.


\textsuperscript{109} Katz, op. cit., p. 180.

\textsuperscript{110} Mh.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., p. 182.
Yet the contrast between the rules laid down by warrior dharma and the actions of the Pandavas outlines the latter’s deceptive tactics even in the face of ‘correct’ behaviour by the enemy. A clear example of this conscious deception is told in the story of the death of Drona. Using the advice Drona himself had given about the conditions under which he would prepare to die (which was if he heard a very unpleasant thing from a credible man), the Pandavas trick Drona into believing that his son has been killed. In fact, it was an elephant of the same name that died, and the noble Yudhishthira who deceives Drona with a lie, indistinctly muttering ‘the elephant’ after the name Ashvatthaman. That Yudhishthira’s act was considered morally low is indicated by his previously high flying chariot sinking to earth level from this time on. Many such acts are perpetrated in the desperate bid to win the war; a whole series of tricks is carried out to achieve, finally, the death of Karna. The moral dilemma illuminated by this section of the Mahabharata mirrors the questioning of truth inherent in maya, while simultaneously suggesting that conventional rules are not always the ultimate solution.

The recognition of maya as political chicanery and expediency is apparent to the present day, where rival parties in Indian elections accuse each other of mayajaal – casting a net of maya. The idea of maya remains a strong presence in modern thought in philosophical and religious senses also, not only from the popularity of the mythologies and devotional songs, and the continued traditional teachings, but in the words of prominent figures of the modern (post 1800) era. Nineteenth century Sufi poet Sachal Sarmast emphasised the all pervasiveness of God once the blinkers of maya are removed:

Open your eyes; behold the show, all is a picture of the Lord.
Here, there and everywhere, is that Heart-ravisher, all around.
In some places He is a nightingale; in some, a flower…
My beloved is a great deceiver.

He is like cloth of one name, with innumerable patterns on it.  

Acclaimed Hindu reformer Raja Rammohan Roy, ‘one of the first major thinkers of modern Hinduism’, wrote of *maya* that it is ‘the power of God through which the world receives its birth, existence, and changes’. Another influential figure of the nineteenth century, the still-revered Sri Ramakrishna, stated that God, although within the human heart, was screened from view by *maya* in the same way that fishes in a pond cannot be seen from outside because of the reeds and scum. His disciple, Vivekananda, who became the great twentieth century intermediary between India and the West, wrote:

> There is but One: the Free, the Knower, Self,  
> Without a name, without a form or stain.  
> In Him is *maya*, dreaming all this dream.  
> The Witness, He appears as nature, soul.  
> Know thou art That, *sannyasin* bold!  

And the leading figure of India’s struggle for independence from British rule, M. K. Gandhi, stated ‘I gain peace praying to God to save me from *maya*’, which, in the context of his ‘search for truth’, was the notion of false perception.

From this survey of Indian literature it can be ascertained that the concept of *maya* is of ancient and enduring provenance, continually reappearing from the early sources and equally, being reinvented in later ages and across different traditions. Although due to its complexity (and true to its signification of plurality) it takes varying forms, a sustained and logical thread of meaning persists throughout any apparent differences in interpretation. *Maya* is maker and creation, and it is the illusory nature of that creation, its multiple appearance, that hides the true non-dual nature of all that exists (and does not exist). *Maya*, as creation, encompasses not just material

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113 Peter Heehs (ed.), op. cit., p. 404.  
116 Arvind Sharma, op. cit., p. 118.  
phenomena, but thought, time and the Gods themselves. As creation seems miraculous, inexplicable in its appearance and constant change, *maya* is equated with magic and deception. Over all, the idea of *maya* links and clarifies (impermanent) appearance and (eternal) reality: it is an explanation for the phenomenal universe.

The understanding of *maya* affords a perspective on life which Indian thinkers, through the ages, have found invaluable. The value of *maya*, as a concept foundational to Indian ontology, is reflected in the unremitting attention which has been paid to its nature in its literary heritage. But in India especially, literary elements are interconnected with the other arts, to create an experience that is simultaneously celebratory, practical, ritualistic, and metaphysical. The following chapter addresses the manner in which the idea of *maya* is integral to the traditions of Indian art.
CHAPTER TWO

Maya and Art

... I had almost lost the Hindu instinct for miraculous transformation of the literal. Not only was Vishnu the chief god, but the serpent supporting Vishnu was also the god Vishnu, given a magical, illusory transformation. My years abroad had made me conscious of ineradicable barriers, of beginnings and endings, of lines and definitions. And now, the preparation for the visit to India was setting off an explosion of unrelated images. Reptile, lotus, flying bull, gods, and heroes: All functioning simultaneously as emblem and as real.²

¹ Vishnu, Mahabalipuram, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
How may a doctrine – in this case the complex and seemingly contradictory doctrine of *maya* – be given concrete form? Indologist Heinrich Zimmer believed that, ‘Indian symbols of art voice the same truth as Indian philosophy and myth. They are signals along the way of the same pilgrim’s progress, directing human energies to the same goal of transmutation.’

Throughout the world, art is the sensory representation of ideas, but in India, undoubtedly, in all the arts there appears ‘a voluptuous joy in the manifestation of ideas through physical symbols’. The discernment of *maya* as the passing appearance of the manifest world, as merely the *sign* of its mysterious source, has been essential for the highest goal in Indian religious thought – liberation – to be achieved, and just as importantly, for life to be accorded its true value. This being so, *maya* as concept is foundational to the distinctive style and purpose of ‘Indian art’, which is designed to reflect the universal order, and to serve as an aesthetic approach to its realisation for individual and community alike. The art of any community is of historical interest for its role in mirroring and questioning social attitudes and conditions, and in tracing changes, but in India especially, art and indeed all other social function has been inseparable from religious philosophy and practice.

‘Art’ is a very broad category, and for the present purpose of disclosing the role of *maya* in art in illustration of the idea’s profound influence, it will be sufficient to outline the theory, and scan the content, of India’s primary classical arts. These are temple architecture with its sculptural component, and the theatrical arts: dance, music, and drama. It is not necessary (or possible) here to address the details of India’s prodigious art history, but the general principles and enduring motifs of its canon must be acknowledged. Despite historical variations, a stream of continuity has persisted in this art, arising from the law books (*shastras*) of ancient teachings that are based in a highly developed religious philosophy which spans theories of life’s

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5 Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan writes that ‘there are many arguments for the thesis that the Indian culture which is expressed and reflected by the uninterrupted literary production from the Rgveda onward is an unmistakable continuum which while transforming and rejuvenating itself has always been subject to processes of adaptation and assimilation’, and he proceeds to give examples of such continuities. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles Moore (eds.), *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1957, pp. 14 – 15.
origins and purposes, and proceeds in linking them to the minutiae of daily life. This philosophy is also tied to the sacred language of Sanskrit, which proffers several terms germinal to artistic premise in India. Some of the most important and most frequently encountered of these linguistic terms are alamkara, darshan, lila, and rasa. To begin, though, I will offer an overview of the central idea of maya in Indian life and art, in explanation of the present focus.

The ideas of maya and symbol are vitally connected, as artist and philosopher Jyoti Sahi has written, explaining his understanding of the intention behind the created image:

The symbol does not speak in veiled terms of something which is non-symbolic and factual. Rather, it reveals life itself as symbol – the world as symbol. That is surely what is meant by the term maya ... When we say ‘the world is symbol’ (maya), we state both its preconscious and its rational, discursive, coefficients.  

In other words, maya is the ‘magic power’ of the transformations of which life consists in the changing forms we see (its original meaning); and it is also the rationalised process of ‘measuring’ in time and space by which life comes about, and which is our primary daily vision of the world. Sahi was far from alone in his assessment that the symbol points to the mystery behind the world we see (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

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7 Ibid., p. 89.
Symbols: political flags, Udaipur, (Julie Marsh, 2004).

Christian and Hindu symbols combined, Fort Cochin, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
Several of the most prominent Indologists and art historians of the early twentieth century\(^{10}\) also have recognised the symbolic nature of Indian art and its mirroring of a ‘real world that was intangible’ and as a consequence their own work was motivated by a desire to understand the iconology: the meaning behind the form\(^{11}\). Havell, who had served as principal of the Calcutta School of Art at the turn of the twentieth century, has best described this idea by stating that the main endeavour for Indian art was ‘always directed towards the realization of an idea, reaching through the finite to the infinite’.\(^{12}\)

In the previous chapter we have seen that the idea of \textit{maya} is present in varying forms throughout the written and oral religious and philosophical teachings of the major Indian traditions. These teachings permeated the wider cultural context of daily life through evolving interconnected artforms which, throughout time, crossed the geographic and cultural spread of India. Although it is the ‘twice-born’ Hindu castes who have, historically, been exclusively privy to brahminical teachings, it is through the arts of India that a cultural unity crossing all differences of religion, sect, or status has been broadcast. Two questions must be addressed following this claim: \textit{how} and \textit{why} was the idea of \textit{maya} perpetuated in artistic form?

It is widely acknowledged that the definitive aim of ‘the Indian view’ of life\(^{13}\) is the attainment of ‘spiritual realisation’, or liberation, by whichever name it is known – as \textit{moksha}, \textit{nirvana}, as \textit{atman/brahman}; for devotionalists, as ‘attaining’ Shiva, Krishna or Mahadevi; for Sufis, as \textit{fana} (self obliteration in God). In many schools of Indian philosophy it is argued that the direct experience of this ‘higher’ reality is obscured by losing oneself in \textit{maya}, which is in effect ‘the finite’ of which Havell spoke. It is that state of limited vision from which those who seek truth must be

\(^{10}\) For instance, Ananda Coomaraswamy, E. B. Havell, Stella Kramrisch and Heinrich Zimmer.


\(^{12}\) Ibid., p. 126.

\(^{13}\) It has been repeatedly debated whether, for all the diversity inherent in India as a nation and India as an idea, there yet exists a thread of cultural sharing that enables such blanket statements as ‘the Indian view of life’ or ‘Indian culture’. Many scholars believe that while differences must be acknowledged, it is indeed the case that such generalizations are as valid as they are necessary. See, for instance, Thomas R. Metcalf (ed.), \textit{Modern India. An Interpretive Anthology}, Macmillan, London, 1971; J. E. Llewellyn (ed.), \textit{Defining Hinduism}, Equinox, London, 2005. An excellent discussion entitled ‘Hinduism: The Mind of India’ is given in Ronald Inden, \textit{Imagining India}, Hurst & Company, London, 1990, pp. 85 – 127.
awaken. Within the diverse sects, schools, and creeds of India, methods appropriate to every individual need have been devised, over centuries of changing historical circumstances, to reach just this goal of awakening – to reach beyond the confining worldview that is maya.

As ‘religion’ in India was not separately categorised as it has been in the modern secularised world, but was dharma – the ordained pathway of existence – instructions towards that perfection of understanding must touch every aspect of life. Consequently, there were developments of physical and psychical yoga practices, mantra chanting, dietary restrictions and stipulations, rituals for all times and occasions. The natural world was deified, and pilgrimage, festivals, and a multitude of devotional practices remain part of the social fabric, including dedication to particular teachers, or gurus. The dharma and artha of society, its spiritual and worldly ordering, with rationale of purity and pollution, designated stages of life, and its modelling on the reflection of universal creation as human form, Purusha, had a proficient and functional vision that cannot be separated, ultimately, from the cosmology of moksha and maya.14 Equally, the repudiation of all orthodoxies became another acknowledged path to enlightenment, as attested by the history of wandering seers and tantric outcasts. Art, in all its forms, was a further expressive and enlightening aspect of this worldview, an integral part of that which is now termed religion. In short, ‘it is perfectly true that art is religion in India, and religion art’.15

Most art forms have long been essential means of communication for both social and sacred purposes in all societies – communication between humans themselves and between the human and the sacred realms. Art reflects and participates in the vision of cosmic and earthly order. It conveys guidance through the moral complexities of the world. Further, art imparts a sense of history and identity by relating ancestral exploits, and by illustrating shared community experience and commonly held mythological themes. At its highest level, Indian art was itself a type of yoga which, for both artist and recipient was intended to open the door to a direct

sense of reality, an awakening, through its provision of immediate aesthetic experience.\(^\text{16}\)

Such an awakening is itself a parting of the ‘veil’ of \textit{maya}, the revelation that loosens the bonds of \textit{avidya} (non-knowledge). Indologist Heinrich Zimmer had based his insightful exposition of the metaphysical foundations of Indian sculptural art on the realisation that its highly symbolic, seemingly enigmatic style was in direct contradistinction to European classical art. The latter celebrated the perfection of beauty in this world – human beauty and that of nature – and aimed to reproduce an illusion of that vision, thereby eliciting an emotional identification from the viewer. But, as well as depicting the \textit{samsaric} world, images of daily life in field or court, the Buddha’s story, or familiar mythologies, the more stylised and sometimes ‘unearthly’ images of Indian art portray another realm. It is the realm beyond ordinary human experience, which points to an archetypal, timeless state of being.\(^\text{17}\) This art’s purpose is to enact that which is real but unseen, so that the art itself is \textit{maya}, creative appearance, and metonym of the greater reality. It is a reminder to the viewer of that reality.

The artist is creator bringing form from the formless (\textit{para-rupa}), just as \textit{maya} is the measured out forms of the world; or as in the Vedic myth, Vishnu with three giant strides allots creation from the pre-existing oneness. The creation of artists is, metaphorically, the Creation of the Gods. This art must, then, mirror universal principles, recreating the macrocosm in the microcosm. Precision was essential, and was innate to the geometrical designs of the \textit{yantras} and \textit{mandalas}, the map-like patterns representing the multidimensional world of the cosmos, the world of \textit{maya} in which life unfolds. Correct alignment with the macrocosm, the \textit{rita} or order of the universe, bestowed the magical power to maintain harmony and increase benefit to individuals, community, and the universe itself.

\(^{\text{16}}\) Richard Lannoy, op. cit., p. 23.
Because of this important outcome, the attainment of artistic precision meant that the artist’s creation could not be merely a subjective expression. It must be a controlled depiction, following careful canonical instructions, and encompassing a knowledge experienced by following prescribed meditative techniques.\(^{18}\) If a craftsman were to create an image of Shiva, he must know and have experienced Shiva. He must observe the guidance minutely prescribed by the *Shilpa Shastras*, the art treatises specific to his craft or art, and by the *Agamas*, the ancient texts which deal with temple observances, rituals, and traditions. He would follow, too, the *gurus* of these arts. The canonical heritage resulting from this philosophy had absorbed, and adapted to, changing influences of race and religion over millennia; had flourished or faltered under the patronage of different rulers and trends. Yet the original thread remains, traced through still-existing literature, teachings, and the artworks themselves, which must hold the power to purvey unseen levels of existence, and to aid communion with the Gods for praise and petition. Thus the art serves twofold purpose: it aids both *bhukti* (physical well-being and material gain) and *mukti* (liberation); in doing so, it can be secular, sensuous and spiritual concurrently. At the highest level, these works of art would provide a transformative experience for both artist and worshipper, who would transcend the ‘separation’ that is *maya*. In this way, art is the liminal, the threshold between the sacred and profane worlds. It is unsurprising then, that the foremost example of art embodying these descriptions is the Hindu temple.

Hindu temples and their forerunners, Buddhist *stupas*,\(^{19}\) were designed for both ritual and affect, for the ‘magical’ outcome of connection with the divine: an opening of the veil of *maya*. In design and in spirit, classic temple architecture as described in the *Vastu Shastras*, the architectural law-books, specifically copied the ancient Vedic arena of worship, *yajna* (ritual) – the sacrificial hearth. The pyramidal shape of the temple also harked back to ancient times, suggesting the Godly abode, the mountain, containing the cave within, the inner sanctum. Just as the elaborate ritual practice of the Vedic brahmins and of tantric Buddhism was designed as a magical engagement with the universal forces, so the careful layout of the temple was a visual and

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\(^{19}\) Rowland, op. cit., p. 79.
metaphysical interpretation of these forces, aligning the worshipper within them (see Figure 4).

Like the Buddhist stupas, the centre of the temple was imagined as the axis around which the heavens and the world revolved. Here was found the still and silent space that was the origin of all things, the bindu or zero point, which contains all possibilities – infinity itself. So the innermost sanctum, the abode of the sacred image, is known as the womb (or navel) centre, the garbhagrha, the seed point from which ‘the originating energy of the cosmos is felt to flow out through the fabric of the temple into the everyday world around its foot’.20 This source is reached by the devotee after moving through the outer realms of the temple, a ritual journey in which he or she first pays obeisance to the ‘lesser’ Gods on the periphery, whose powers pave and guard the way. Then the devotee leaves the outer light and the carved images of the temple walls, which represent the multiple forms of earthly and heavenly life (maya), and journeying inward, enters the darkened space of the inner sanctum. Here resides the iconic form of the God. This journey which is both physical and meditative, is in psychical terms one that leads from the ‘outer darkness’ of the ignorant waking state to ‘inner light’ of illumination.21 It is a crossing through the maya of separative ego focus to the peace of surrender to the greater unity.

The sacred spaces of the temple were mapped out using geometrically patterned yantras as cosmographical groundplans.22 These designs also incorporated the idea from the Vedic creation myth of the Purusha, the ‘cosmic person’, whose body fragmented, emanating all creation. This mythology is an analogy of maya: creation as multiplicity from an original unity. Here, Purusha, wholeness, is reintegrated and contained, in the basic square temple pattern.23 Through its mathematically controlled imitation of the cosmos and its laws, and through sacralising ceremonies, the temple

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21 Kapila Vatsyayan, op. cit., p. 80.
space was designed to be a place of harmony, where the physical and the
metaphysical worlds, the abstract and the concrete, meet and reunify24 (see Figure 5).
It is therefore a *tirtha*, a ford or crossing place from one mode of being to another:
from *maya* to *moksha*.

A *tirtha* is believed to be a place of transformation, where one can be freed from
the bonds of ignorance into the grace of liberation, *moksha*. The Jaina saints are
called *tirthankaras* (makers of a ford); and places of mythological significance, such
as Kurukshetra, the site of the great war of the *Mahabharata*, or Krishna’s village of
Vrindavan, are also places of pilgrimage – *tirthayatras*. Other Indian towns, such as
the southern city of Madurai, and Varanasi in the north, are also well-known *tirthas*,
and these sacred towns, microcosms of the cosmos, are built following the same
*mandala*-based design as the temple.25 The temple itself is situated at the town’s
heart.

The temple has served as the pivot of community life – social, religious, and
economic – as concert and lecture hall, and as art gallery, nurturing the great
traditions of dance, music, sculpture, and painting. Under the patronage of local
rulers, these traditions developed into specialist artforms that have continued to
embody Indian cultural heritage even as they have moved away from the temple
precinct. These arts remain mutually enhancing, inter-related in performance,
retelling the same mythologies, and sharing the same underlying philosophy as the art
of temple architecture: the realisation of the interconnectedness of *all* life and

24 Klostermaier, op. cit., p. 300.
26 Sri Meenakshi Temple, Madurai, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
the desire for the maintenance and reintegration of the universal order (rita dharma). They are aims founded in the remembrance of maya. A well-known story from the Gupta period in the Visnudharmottara Purana emphasises the interconnection of the arts when a certain king, Vajra, asks the rishi Markandeya how to attain happiness in this and in ‘the other’ world.

Markandeya answers that the worship of the Gods is conducive to such happiness. But as humans have forgotten how to see the Gods, they must be given both form and place. This can be done by the creation of images, and of temples. King Vajra then requests correct instruction in the art of image-making, so that the image he creates will be fine enough to manifest the deity at any time that the king invokes it. But the rishi replies that before understanding image-making, one must master the art of painting; and before learning the canon of painting, one must know that of the dance. Vajra requests to be taught painting and dance, only to be told that to be successful in understanding dance, it is necessary to know instrumental music. This task depends on learning first the art of vocal music – voice and song. But, Markandeya warns, vocal music can only be understood by mastering the forms and metre of recitation, both of poetry and prose.28 This tale underlines the true non-duality of existence, its interconnectedness, made manifest in the philosophy of art and aesthetics. It admonishes the illusion (maya) of imagining that each art form could stand alone, and in making this correction, it is a reflection of the wider belief in the ‘oneness’ of existence that is so much an insistent theme in Indian philosophy, and which, ultimately, Indian art conveys. The Hindu temple itself integrated several artforms. Rock-carved or earthenware freestanding figures, rock-cut or stuccoed wall murals and friezes were iconographical illustrations of concepts such as maya (magic appearance) and dharma (correct conduct) in their retelling of ancient myths, and depicted lively scenes from the daily life of the world around. The 7th century rock-wall carving named ‘Arjuna’s Penance’, or ‘Descent of the Ganges’ at Mamallapuram in Tamil Nadu demonstrates all these elements in one panorama. Heavenly and human creatures are depicted in play, in work, and in prayer above and

around the families of elephants which cluster at its base (see Figure 7). The naga (water) spirits, in central place, are carved in a natural vertical rock cleft which serves as the fall of the sacred river Ganges from its heavenly source. Heinrich Zimmer has remarked of this sight that:

Here is art inspired by the monistic view of life that appears everywhere in Hindu philosophy and myth. Everything is alive. The entire universe is alive; only the degrees of life vary. Everything proceeds from the divine life-substance-and-energy as a temporary transmutation. All is part of the universal display of God’s Maya.29

Maya is also portrayed in stone and painted images of the Goddess who personifies that quality as both delusion and creation – Durga, as Mahamaya. While engaged in a fierce battle with the buffalo demon, Mahisha, her face remains tranquil, revealing that for her, life is lila, a game in the passing world of maya30 (see Figure 6). The maya of Mahisha is clearly seen in his half human, half animal form as he attempts to escape by changing guise.

Significantly, temple carvings are also alamkara – ornament. The importance of this element is demonstrated by the existence of the Alamkarashastra, the discipline of aesthetics which sets out the craft of ornamentation. Alamkara is the manifested attribute, the quality made visible, of the image it adorns. In art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy’s essay on ‘Ornament’ he illuminates this concept by citing the Pancatantra (111.120): ‘the mind is adorned (alamkriyate) by learning, folly by vice, elephants by mast, rivers by water, night by the moon, resolution by composure, kingship by leading.’31 Just as the allusions of poetry add dimensions to language, adornment of an object enhances its meaning and its impact, adding to its affective power, so that:

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29 Heinrich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization, op. cit., p. 119.
Figure 6

Figure 7

32 Durga, Mahabalipuram, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
33 Arjuna’s Penance, Mahabalipuram, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
this imagery is designed to elicit a bodily engagement – a discursive aesthetic or experiential response – as attested to by the performative nature of Hindu worship. Thus the use of these images in the context of this architecture is tactical and is a means of engaging the worshipper in a liminal encounter with the Divine.34

To further the achievement of the desired ‘liminal encounter’ (overcoming maya) other decorative effects – painting, adornment with precious gems and metals, and beautiful cloth hangings – added to the sensuous affect of temple ornamentation.35 The Gods are pampered as honoured guests, their splendour mirrored and praised, for the Creator, in Hindu thought, is Satyam Shivam Sundaram – all that is True, Good, and Beautiful. In this thought, the permeation of the essence of God through all things of the world must be acknowledged; divinity and creation are as one, and non-recognition of this condition is maya. Emphasis on beauty was a reminder of this view, but also, decoration was important in illuminating the attributes of the Gods. Their individual emblems were added to their images. For instance, the Goddess of learning, of poetry and music, Sarasvati, is portrayed holding the vina, a musical instrument, a book, and prayer beads, the beauty and transformative power of knowledge enhanced by her vehicle, the swan. Thus the rock-carved or cast bronze images of the Gods within and without the temple provide contemplative and inspirational forms for devotion, enhanced by the arresting affects and significance of ornamentation, the strong presence of the temple itself, and the care with which they had been crafted.

The Shilpa Shastras and Agamas were elaborately specific about the science of sculpture. They gave detailed guidance for every imaginable element of the creation – on units of measurement, the form and spiritual qualities of the deities, their weapons, gestures and stances, as well as the contemplative hymns that accompany them. The purpose of this instruction, with its ritual and meditative practice, is that the artisan must overcome the maya of his own subjectivity (or selfhood) before being able to

bring forth the qualities of the God into the image, the *murti* (embodiment). For purposes of worship, then, the image becomes the deity itself. This embodiment of the sacred is the focus of one of the most meaningful and commonly enacted of Hindu rituals, *darshan*, which is, ideally, an instant dispersal of *maya*.

*Darshan* can be translated as ‘seeing’ or ‘view’; specifically, ‘seeing’ the divine or a world ‘view’. Whether related to an image, a symbol, a temple, times, or places, to a spiritual figure or a set of ideas, this is a way of seeing. Hence the six systems of Hindu philosophy are called ‘*darshanas*’. *Rishis*, or ‘seers’ were the bearers of the earliest Hindu scriptures, and in contemporary India, seers are still revered as channels of divinity. Diana Eck has written that the art and images of India, which are the ‘visual texts’ of a visually oriented culture, must be interpreted through the understanding of *darshan*, which she names ‘the single most common and significant element of Hindu worship’ – it is meeting the eyes of God.36

In this encounter, not only does the devotee ‘see’ (and therefore ‘know’) God, but vice-versa – the God ‘sees’ and ‘knows’ the devotee. Seeing is an indirect form of touch, so *darshan* is a form of touching God.37 ‘Seeing’, ‘touching’ are very concrete manners of knowing the divine; surprisingly so, Eck comments, in ‘other-worldly’ India.38 But the sensuality of Hinduism is not surprising when the whole of life is considered a manifestation of God in all the ‘names and forms’, so that Hindu worship:

... full use of the senses – seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing. One ‘sees’ the image of the deity (*darshan*). One ‘touches’ it with one’s hands (*sparsa*), and one also ‘touches’ the limbs of one’s own body to establish the presence of various deities (*nyasa*). One ‘hears’ the sacred sound of the *mantras* (*sravana*). The ringing of bells, the offering of oil lamps, the presentation of flowers, the pouring of water and milk, the sipping of sanctified liquid offerings, the eating of consecrated food –

36 Diana L. Eck, op. cit., p. 1.
37 Ibid., p. 6.
38 Ibid., p. 9.
these are the basic constituents of Hindu worship, puja.39 (See Figure 8 and Figure 9.)

Puja, the rituals of devotional worship, became the main element of Hindu popular religious practice following the Vedic era yajna rituals of the sacrificial altar, which had become solely the precinct of the brahmin priests. The aim of personal puja is to contact the God, ideally to experience God — to reach beyond the profane world (maya), whether for purposes of pragmatism (to request boons), for purification and auspiciousness, or (for the most dedicated) to attain transcendence through devotion or yogic knowledge. The whole sensual temple world, and its ritual, leads towards this goal; and temples or shrines of all sizes are to be found, in India, in every conceivable setting (see Figure 10, Figure 11, Figure 12, Figure 13, Figure 14, and Figure 15).

Darshan extends beyond the temple, so that it is an element of yatra, pilgrimage. The places of pilgrimage, whether mountain, river, mythological site, temple, holy personage, tomb, or any other revered object are places where darshan is sought. It is the essence of the ritual ‘processions’ of the Gods that are so much a part of Indian life — the images of the Gods are dressed and paraded through the streets on special occasions so that darshan may be exchanged. The Gods are always in sight: there is a constancy of ‘seeing’ the sacred. Their images are in painted or moulded forms above doorways, draped with garlands inside shops or towering in neon lights above night city streets. They are to be seen in miniature shrines which grace vehicle dashboards, or are found unexpectedly under bushes on mountain tracks.

39 Ibid., p. 9.

Figure 10

Figure 11

42 Roadside shrine: Shiva, Mahabalipuram, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
43 Roadside shrine: Durga, Mt Abu, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
Figure 12\textsuperscript{44}

Figure 13\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} Shiva Linga, Mt Abu, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
\textsuperscript{45} Ganesha, Pune, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
Figure 14  

Figure 15

46 Deities, Pune, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
47 Deities, Madurai, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
There is a thriving trade in God-images – whether as statuettes or brightly coloured prints for framing or calendar heads – for home puja or business blessing (see Figure 16 and Figure 17). At festival times these images proliferate to an even greater extent and in even greater sizes (see Figure 18 and Figure 19). In the final ritual immersion, the dissolution of the murti in a body of water, returning to the formlessness of brahman, the lesson of life’s ephemeral nature is given once again: a remembrance of maya. The same gesture of surrender is implicit in the sweeping away, on their completion, of the intricate sand mandalas constructed by Tibetan Buddhist monks.

A whole canon of aesthetic theory has been developed in India to reach the heightened experience similarly exemplified by darshan. For instance, the theory of rasa is foundational to Hindu art criticism, being the essential and most important element not only to painting and sculpture, but to poetry and all theatrical performance, including dance. Rasa means ‘taste’, ‘flavour’, or ‘sentiment’. It is the art of emotion, and so is the very soul of poetics, according to its earliest and best acknowledged proponent who is identified simply as ‘Bharata’ – actor (c. 200BCE-200CE). In his Natyashastra (Treatise on Dramaturgy) Bharata classified nine primary emotional states that provoke rasa: comedy, eroticism, heroism, grief, fear, wonder, revulsion, fury, and serenity. As well, he enumerated more than thirty ‘transient’ emotional states. The appreciation of the rasa of these states was even more important a component of Indian drama than was the storyline, or plot. For all participants, spectators and performers, to experience rasa was to be subsumed by a universalised form of the particular emotion portrayed: its pure form. Ideally, this objective, yet ‘felt’, prescience became ‘a supramundane experience, quite distinct from ordinary modes of knowledge’.

Figure 16\textsuperscript{50}

Figure 17\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{50} Mahabalipuram, (Julie Marsh, 2004).

\textsuperscript{51} Chennai, (Julie Marsh, 2004).
Sanskrit scholar V. Raghavan has similarly described this experience as a ‘momentary glimpse of Supreme Beatitude.’ But whether this level of transcendence was attained, or simply a delight in the play of the world was experienced, was dependent not only on the degree of knowledge of Indian aesthetics of the participants, but also on their sensitivity. A person who is most responsive to *rasa* is called *rasika*, and Raghavan explains that:

> These words *rasa* and *rasika* are as much key words of Indian culture as *dharma* or *brahman*, and suggest how in Indian culture there is an imperceptible shading off from the spiritual to the aesthetic, and vice-versa.

Differing participation in the *rasa* experience mirrors the various levels of participation in the Hindu view of the world generally. It may be viewed all as play (*lila*): the glorious sport of the divine spirit with the moving pieces of its creation. It may take the form of *bhakti*, devotion to one or many of the manifestations of God in a personalised form (*bhagavan*, or *ishta-deva*); this devotion itself may take varying forms of relating to the divinity, for union with God may just as well be sought through laughter or anger as through love (as was the case with Ravana’s battle with Rama in the *Ramayana*). Practising Hinduism may be an engagement with *jnana*, knowledge through understanding, and here appreciation of the subtleties of art is reflected. Play, emotion, knowledge – *rasa* engages them all in its moods, the overriding one of which is quietitude, or serenity. As a form of *yoga*, ultimate participation in *rasa* is a union with emotions sublimated as universal energies, beyond personal subjectivity; so *rasa* is another device to reach, at least temporarily, a removal of *maya*’s bonds, and an ‘at-onement’.

*Rasa* theory applies to all Indian artforms, but the overall affective quality of *rasa* in theatre echoes that of the sensuality of the temple experience. Although theatrical enactments of the Epics, Puranas, and other stories of Gods, humans, and the whole

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55 Ibid., p. 258.
natural world demonstrated moral and dharmik ideals, and engaged in established ritual while doing so, it was generally agreed by critics that ‘the didactic aspect of a play or poem should always be subordinated to the primary aim of artistic enjoyment’. In other words, the everyday perspective of the audience should be transcended. The purpose of traditional performances was not so much to tell a story from beginning to end, but ‘to dwell on specific moments in the story, so that its minutest details can evoke a world of sensations and truth’. The attainment of ‘artistic enjoyment’ was the focus of the systematic instructions for the theatrical arts developed in the ancient manual of instruction, the Natyashastra. Its stated author, Bharata, reports Brahma’s intention that He (as the God of creation):

... shall promulgate a fifth Veda called Natyaveda which exemplifies righteousness, brings prosperity, causes fame, contains instruction, and comprehends all activities forming a guide to the future generations as well. It would be replete with the essence of all scientific ideas and demonstrative of all arts and crafts besides embracing episodes.

Thus was theatre explicitly connected with the Gods. And, illustrating King Vajra’s lesson that all the arts are inter-related, literature, music, dance, mime, painting, sculpture, and architecture all were encompassed as Natya – theatre. Not only was theatre to be appreciated and shared by all people, no matter what their age, intellect or stage of life, but importantly, as darshan and ritual, theatrical participation, whether as spectator or actor, would serve as purification, being in Bharata’s view ‘as meritorious as a (Vedic) sacrifice’. Hence, just as temple design is stipulated with exactness in the Silpashastras to alignment with divine forces, so too the ideal of theatre construction is detailed in the Natyashastra, from selection of the site and the ceremonial laying of the foundations, to the materials to be used and the seating arrangements. The ideal theatre was to be a practical and harmonious place, well designed for both viewing and acoustics, but also was a sanctified,

56 Ibid., p. 257.
58 Dr. N. P. Unni (trans.), Natyashastra Vol. 2, op. cit., p. 4.
59 Ibid., p.22.
In keeping with this careful design, set rituals were prescribed to
gain the favour of the relevant deities and to open the performance, to assure it would
be in Natyashastra terms, a ‘human or a divine success’. Sanskrit theatre scholar
Farley P. Richmond suggests that ‘Perhaps the Natyashastra means that divine
performances were those in which the spectators showed neither interest nor
disinterest, in which they were elevated to a state of supreme bliss akin to that of a
yogi who experiences divine revelations’. This would be a state of the perfection of
rasa: a state beyond maya.

Rasa continues to be a key word of Indian culture, and the totality of the theatre
experience, and the instruction of the Natyashastra (and other manuals of theatrical
regulations) nurtures its attainment. For actors and dancers, the Natyashastra contains
five chapters on bodily movement alone, itemizing head movements, glances, special
movements for the chin, lower lip, and eyebrows, sixty-seven hand gestures –
movements for every part of the body, and all categorized according to the emotions
they convey. Costume, makeup, and jewellery are specified, so that the race, caste,
social status, and sex of any character is obvious from his or her appearance. Vividly
coloured costumes, the dancer’s golden ornaments and ringing ankle bells, the stage
perfumed and decorated with flowers, subtleties of lighting, and not least the musical
arrangement – all are calculated for the utmost enjoyment and affect. Most
importantly, the actor, dancer, or musician must be not only physically skilled and
perfected, but internally controlled. Individual ego must not confuse the purity of
expression, just as the sculptor fashioning forms of the Gods must attain a selfless
state to ‘channel’ the divine pattern and break the veil of illusion that is maya.

In Hinduism, the Gods themselves are dancers. The constant changing of the
universe – its moving molecular formations, the path of the planets and suns, the
passing show of the days and nights, the inevitable round of life and death, the
rhythm of the tides, of seasons and of breath, and in Hindu thought, time itself which
revolves in cyclic ages – all is the great cosmic dance of God. It is all the maya, the

60 Farley P. Richmond. Darius L. Swann & Phillip Zarilli (eds.), Indian Theatre: Traditions of
display or play (lila), of the God’s creative energy (maya/shakti). Not only has dance, from time immemorial (and across the globe) been a religious offering and expression, but it is especially so in India, where three of the best-loved Gods, Shiva, Krishna, and Ganesha, are still well known for, and often portrayed in, their aspects as dancers. One of the most commonly recognised remnants of the ancient Indus Valley civilisation which predates these ‘current’ forms of God is a figure believed to be a dancing girl.

Of all the Gods, Shiva as Nataraja is ‘Lord of the Dance’. The South Indian bronze images of Nataraja typically show the dancing God encircled by a wheel of flame, which is ‘a classical metaphor for defining maya’; this ‘apparently continuous circle of fire’ also indicates the Indian cyclic concept of time (as definitively expressed in the Buddhist samsara – the wheel of existence).63 One foot of Nataraja treads down upon the demon, Muyalaka (or maya, the great illusion), while a left hand points to the other foot, which is raised, and represents release from this bondage.64 As ‘Lord of the stage of this transitory world’ Nataraja’s dance represents his five activities – creation; preservation and support; destruction and evolution; veiling, embodiment and illusion; release and salvation.65 He dances the universe into being and dances in joy for the bliss (ananda) of life. He triumphs over all evils in the ferocious warrior dance (tandava). He dances fiercely in the cremation-ground, where all the dross of life is reduced to ashes, for samhara is his dance of death and it symbolizes the release of souls from the world of illusion (maya).66 But asceticism also overcomes maya, and Shiva, the uniter of opposites, also performs a calm yogic dance on top of sacred Mount Kailash, in the contemplative stillness of the evening.67 Shiva’s female consorts, Parvati and Kali, are known for dances emblematic of their respective traits: Parvati dances the gentle lasya style which shows her love and devotion, while Kali, like Shiva, dances in the burning grounds, reducing all things to nothingness in her relentless role as time.

63 Lannoy, op. cit., p. 290.
65 Ibid., p. 103.
66 Singha and Massey, op. cit., p. 23.
Krishna is remembered for his flirtatious dance with the *gopis*, or milkmaids, in a well-loved tale of *bhakti* mythology which is still celebrated in the *Raslila* festivals. Depictions of this scene in works of art illustrate not just forms of folk-dance, but on a more symbolic note, represent the dance of love which is the soul’s uniting with God. And other paintings and sculptures depict Krishna dancing in glee at stealing from his mother’s butter jar, or his dance to defeat the water serpent, Kaliya. Ganesha’s pot-bellied elephant-headed body with swaying trunk is also frequently depicted in dancing pose, poised on one foot, arms upraised, holding various objects, such as mangoes for fruitfulness, a serpent for fertility, a hatchet signifying the ‘cutting away of false teaching’ or an elephant-goad which may represent ‘the logic that cuts through illusion’. His hands are held in various significant gestures (*mudras*).

Indian art is replete with representations of Gods and humans as dancers, and undoubtedly the centrality of dance as cultural icon throughout India’s history cannot be overestimated. From centuries past, dance had long been used as a path of devotional ecstasy, as a mode of trance and self-forgetfulness, such as that embraced by Sufi and *bhakti* traditions, and in many regional festivities honouring local deities. The heavens too are the realm of the celestial dancers, the *apsarasas*, so often depicted in carvings and paintings on temples throughout India. The great temple at Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu is dedicated primarily to Shiva as Nataraja; and the *natyamandapa*, the dance pavilion, was a feature of much temple architecture, most famously, at the 13th century Sun Temple of Konark in Orissa.

The *devadasi* (temple dancer) was an integral part of temple worship in the era of classical Hinduism. She was *nityasumangali* – ever auspicious – as she was given in marriage to the Gods, so she occupied a special place in society. In the late era of British colonialism, the *devadasi* would become a contested figure in India’s moral re-invention, carrying double symbolic weight – as woman, and as representative of ‘heathen’ elements of Indian culture. Consequently, in the twentieth century, forms of

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classical and folk dancing in India would become an important element of cultural identity, being ‘re-invented’ by twentieth century nationalists after a period of prohibition. The current (early twenty-first century) worldwide craze for ‘Bollywood’ films with their definitive song and dance scenes continues to emphasise the indisputable joy, familiarity, and meaning dance holds for this culture. It is truly lila, the play of life that is a celebration of creation and creative energy, while embodying a type of yogic ‘joining’ – overcoming the duality of maya by aligning with the flow of life’s energy.

Furthering this definition, Shanta Serbjeet Singh believes Indian dance is indeed ‘the ultimate metaphor’. She states that (my emphasis):

… it is dance which provides us with a mirror view of the ancient Hindu conception of the universe and the nature of reality. Indian dance, I believe, parallels three of the major constructs of this world view, the very foundation on which rest the majestic edifice of Indian thought. These are: first, the awareness that everything in this world, from events to the experience of all phenomena, is the manifestation of a basic oneness. Secondly, the awareness of the relativity and polar relationship of all opposites. Much before the great Western explorers of the mind of the twentieth century acknowledged the grey areas between black and white, between good and bad, pleasure and pain, life and death and above all the male-female polarity in each of us, Indian thought maintained that these are not absolute experiences, capable of being slotted in neat, watertight compartments. It said that they are merely two sides of the same reality, opposite but reconcilable parts of a single whole. Thirdly and finally, that space and time are by no means absolute but constructs of the mind and like all other intellectual concepts, to be treated as relative, limited and illusory.70

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Singh explains that dance is based on the same metaphysical idea, expressed as *mandala*, that underlies the ideals of temple architecture, sculpture, philosophy, the martial arts, meditation practice, and other living traditions of India. It is the unity and interrelation of all phenomena: the counterpoise of *maya*. In using the space/time concepts that inform the *mandala* construct, the first and most basic pose of the dancer, as laid down in the *Natyashastra*, is named ‘*mandala’*.\(^{71}\) Essentially, the *mandala* is a magical map, or grid, of existence (forces), expressing a still tension central to an expanding cosmos\(^{72}\) and the dancer’s body is, in this schema, the cosmos moving around the *axis mundi*\(^{73}\) (see Figure 20 and Figure 21). The dancer, at once disciplined and selflessly spontaneous, is always centred on this still axis, metaphorically transcending the limits of space and time that are *maya*, illusory. Furthermore, the illusory boundaries of personality and gender are also removed. In the *Ekharya* (solo) dance, as laid down by Bharata, the dancer must assume a vast variety of roles in a brief space of time; and in the *tandava* and *lasya* forms of dance, she or he encapsulates both the male and female aspects of life respectively.\(^{74}\)

Indian dance is a form of communication which interlinks the human world and that of the Gods through its story-telling and its evocation of *rasa*, aided by the canon of artistic method and philosophy. Naturally, music (as sound and tempo) is inextricably linked with the dance, especially in India where ‘dance has always

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:\(^{72}\) Ibid., p. 25.

:\(^{73}\) Ibid., p. 12.

:\(^{74}\) Ibid., p. 22.
Shri Yantra

Figure 20\textsuperscript{75}

Figure 21\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{75} Shanta Serbjeet Singh, op. cit., p. 13.

\textsuperscript{76} Aarthi Ramkumar, Bharata Natyam, Chennai, (Julie Marsh, 1994).
been accompanied by song, and music has been reinforced by gesture.\textsuperscript{77} In times past, the courtesans of kings sang and danced to keep the atmosphere at court auspicious.\textsuperscript{78} Regional music, described as ‘tribal’ and ‘folk’ music, is often celebratory of the life-cycle, or can be ritualistic; some is:

more or less secular ... such as greeting songs, lullabies, love and courtship songs, ballads and humorous songs. On the occasion of certain festivals and celebrations, members of the tribes may dance and sing for the pure joy of it ... one may also hear songs describing their ancestry and the origin of the tribe.\textsuperscript{79}

Hindu mythology and religious philosophy are ‘an integral part of much Indian folk music’.\textsuperscript{80} The classical and folk cultures of all the Indian arts are mutually influential. The classical tradition of music in Indian has filtered throughout the broader culture, and has its roots in magical qualities, for \textit{nada} (sound, vibration) is thought of as the genesis of creation. This idea is elaborated in language and practice. \textit{Vac} is known as the Goddess of speech and the origin of the universe; she is said to be the ‘mother of the Vedas’ as they were revealed to the \textit{rishis} (seers) as ‘\textit{shruti}’ – ‘that which is heard’. These scriptures were then transmitted orally through brahmin priests for hundreds of years and their recitation remains the primary function of those trained for this purpose. The \textit{Sama-Veda} is a whole treatise of verses for chanting. The singing of hymns (a collective worship variously known as \textit{bhajan}, \textit{satsang}, or \textit{kirtan}) and the ringing of a handbell to summon the Gods became common components of Hindu religious ceremony, and \textit{mantra} an important form of ‘sound worship’. \textit{Mantras} are mystical and deeply symbolic formulas of words or sounds to be chanted, recited, or meditated upon to invoke the blessings of the Gods. The syllable \textit{Om} is held to be the primeval vibration, the most sacred sound of all; it

\textsuperscript{78} Saskia C. Kersenboom-Storey, op. cit., p. 65.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., p. 236.
is the ‘All Pervading’, which transcends space, time, and form.\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Om} is a vehicle, then, for transcending \textit{maya}, as too are other \textit{mantras} used for such purpose.

With such emphasis on recitation and on chanting and its powers, studies in sound and phonetics developed to become the \textit{svaras} (voice notes) and \textit{ragas} (fixed melodic structures) of Indian music. \textit{Ragas} are based in musical (time) measurements, echoing the measurements (separations) made in Vishnu’s strides of creation. And ‘\textit{rag}’ also means ‘passion’ for, common to Indian art forms, the primary aim of music is the transcending quality of \textit{rasa}, emotion. Each \textit{raga} has its own \textit{rasa} depending on the time of day or year it depicts, or the scene from mythology, or aspect of God which it embodies; the \textit{raga} (or feminine form \textit{ragini}) is itself a living entity to be called forth by the musicians. This embodiment is further expressed in the miniature paintings the \textit{Ragamala} albums, in which ‘the musical melodies are visualized either as deities or human beings involved in various activities’\textsuperscript{82} (see Figure 22). For instance, the \textit{megh raga} is associated with rain, and is pictured as a being of ‘dark complexion, his hair is tied in a knot on the crown of his head, and in his hand he balances a sharp-edged sword’.\textsuperscript{83} Here again is an illustration of the facility in Indian art of symbolising a perception of reality that must be drawn forth from the ‘veil’ of \textit{maya}.

Again, as with dance, music is also linked to the sacred by the depiction of the Gods as musicians. In fact, musical instruments are important aspects of the Gods’ attributes, symbolizing their magical creativity (\textit{maya}) and associated with their respective identities. The flute, for instance, is so much a part of Krishna as Venugopala (the cowherd who entrances the milkmaids with his playing) that a dancer has only to strike a flute-playing pose and the audience knows it is Krishna they see, breathing life as sound into the world. Saraswati, Goddess of learning, is easily recognised by the \textit{vina}, a harp-like instrument that she holds; and one hand of Shiva grasps the \textit{damaru}, a small drum which, in its beating, has been


\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., p. 160.

THE ASCETIC GIRL WHO IS THE MUSICAL MODE ASAVARI RAGINI — BUNDI — CA. 1675
GOPI KRISHNA KANORIA COLLECTION, CALCUTTA

Figure 22

interpreted as the very link between the manifest and unmanifest worlds.\textsuperscript{85} It is common to see the Gods and others, both human and heavenly worshippers – such as the celestial musicians the gandharvas – depicted playing a great variety of instruments. They make music in adoration and reverence, purely for delight, or in ceremonial ritual. Such scenes are the subject of paintings, rock or wood carvings, bronze sculptures, and printed and painted textiles, and of course, of formal and informal theatrical performance.\textsuperscript{86}

Beyond theatrical confines, the music of poet-saints and Sufis (Islamic renunciants) accompanied their wandering pilgrimage. The ascetic Sufis yearned for, and sang of, self-annihilation in God (\textit{fana}), blurring the boundaries of religion and sect in their devotional quest that ‘the knower and the known’ be as one. Using regional dialects, which the mass of people could understand, Hindu singer-saints communicated ideas of philosophy, ethics, and religion, and rendered musical versions of texts from the Sanskrit Epics and Puranas.\textsuperscript{87} The importance of music in liberation (from the \textit{maya} of false perception) was decidedly stated by Tyagaraja, the great South Indian composer (1767 – 1847), who declaimed:

\begin{quote}
O Mind! Drink and revel in the ambrosia of melody; it gives one the fruit of sacrifices and contemplation, renunciation as well as enjoyment; Tyagaraja knows that they who are proficient in sound, the mystic syllable \textit{Om}, and the music notes – which are all of the form of the Lord Himself – are liberated souls.\textsuperscript{88}
\end{quote}

Here Tyagaraja encompasses (and advises) several aspects of Hindu teaching on the meaning and aim of human existence. He celebrates \textit{kama}, the pleasure principle, in the sensuous suggestion of ‘revelling’ in the sweet nectar (\textit{rasa}) of music; he notes that for this reason, music is even more rewarding than yogic practices (sacrifice, renunciation and contemplation); and he mentions the metaphysical understanding of

\textsuperscript{87} de Bary, op. cit., p. 347.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p. 270.
sound, the knowledge of which is also the liberating knowledge of God. To know or to truly experience music is to overcome the limits of *maya*, in recognising that sound, syllable and note are all a ‘form of the Lord’.

The essential function of music and song in Indian tradition may, then, be assessed as elevating the soul from the mundane world that is *maya*, and this idea is to be accomplished through the metaphysics of sound and through emotional sublimation, *rasa*. The high spiritual value of music can be gauged by noting that all the great musicians of India have also been venerated as saints.\(^9\) Naturally too, conjoined with the other theatrical arts, such as mime, puppetry, and dance, musical dramas serve simply to entertain. But this entertainment is simultaneously pedagogic. Indian theatrical performances have, historically, revolved most predominantly around the retelling of stories from the Epics – the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* – and the Puranas. Moreover, there is a well-loved canon of classical plays, many of which also draw upon the same ancient literature, and in their enactment employ the same theatrical aesthetics. These basic influences extend even beyond the main (but interlocking) theatrical genres – classical, ritual, folk, devotional, and modern – providing good grounds for claiming that ‘common religious-philosophical assumptions’ prevail in all forms of Hindu dramatic performance.\(^9\) In their examination of Hindu theatre, Richmond, Swann and Zarrilli explain that:

> The foremost of these assumptions is that this life is characterized by *maya*, or illusion, and is part of an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Only by finding a path to liberation of the soul from bondage will the fetters of attachment and illusion be permanently broken and the soul freed from the cycle of rebirth. Hindus have traditionally recognised three paths that lead to liberation: the way of action, the way of knowledge, and the way of devotion. Each of these approaches contributes to the texture and shape of Indian theatre.\(^9\)

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\(^9\) Ibid., p. 257.


\(^9\) Ibid., p. 7.
The three traditional paths to liberation – action, knowledge, devotion – have merged in performance tradition. They have contributed, respectively, theatre ritual (following *Natyashastra* directions); *rasa*, as the ‘fundamental aesthetic principle’; and *bhakti*, in the devotional stories of Vishnu, Krishna and Rama, which are so often the focus of affective performance art.\(^92\) This is a useful assessment and summary of the religious-philosophical background to Indian theatre. It underlines the centrality of awakening from *maya* as motif and motivation in Hindu theatre, and deserves further clarification for this purpose.

Firstly, we have already looked at the meaning of *rasa*, which is the refinement by art of everyday emotion, *bhava*. Secondly, classical (Sanskrit) theatre ritual and design echo the magical processes found in temple worship and *puja*, and are detailed in the *Natyashastra*. Elaborate rituals and ceremonies are carried out before the play; these serve the purposes of propitiating and inviting the Gods, and of preparing the minds and hearts of both audience and players alike for the event. Ideally, the actors, dancers, and musicians should be, like the artisans who carve or cast the *murty* (image) of the God, trained to perfection in their art. Every movement and gesture and look must be exact in its expression; but also they must be in a selfless and receptive mental state in order to *become* the character or story their body enacts. This ‘becoming’, called *sattvika* is the most important aspect of the four kinds of acting delivery, or *abhinaya* (‘carrying forward’); the other three being *angika*, movement of hands, lips, neck and feet, *vacika*, speech and song, and *aharya*, costume and makeup.\(^93\) True mimicry, or representation, is *maya* exemplified, manifesting the seen from the unseen, whisking away the curtain of time to reveal the timeless, transporting all participants from the mundane world. The detailed instructions for theatrical performance left nothing to chance in achieving this aim. Traditional ritual, with its magical and yogic elements, still lives on in both classical and folk performance, where players continue to chant sacred hymns before the play commences, make obeisance to the musical instruments, and offer flowers and fruits to the Gods.\(^94\)

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\(^{92}\) Ibid., pp. 7 – 8.
\(^{93}\) Balwant Gargi, op. cit., p. 8.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., p. 8.
The third aspect of liberation mentioned above is bhakti, the centrality of which in Indian performance art is undeniable. Stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana, from Gita Govinda, the Puranas, the Buddhist Jataka Tales or from the voluminous bhakti literatures are played out, and included or referenced even in ‘secular’ dramas. Hence the mythologies of the Gods are ever revivified, while absorbing and reflecting regional differences, and adapting through the constraints and advances of time. The roads and railways built during the rule of the British in India facilitated the journeys of travelling players, and of pilgrims attending melas and lilas where these stories were feted. A proliferation of literature blossomed with print technology and consequent increasing literacy, and, in the twentieth century a whole communications revolution came about with the advent of electronic media – radio, film, and television – which continued to relay the Epic tales to an ever-expanding audience.95

Bhakti, rasa, and ritual have continued to underpin the style of Indian theatrical arts, noticeably in publicly enacted celebrations such as the Rasa Lila and Ram Lila, or in processional extravaganzas such as Ganesh Chaturthi or Dasara, where images of Ganesh or Durga are carried in splendour through the devoted crowds, to a final immersion in rivers or ocean. But, just as important an issue to address is the religious-philosophical assumption stated above, that ‘this life is characterised by maya, or illusion, and is part of an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth’, for it is this cyclic worldview that has given rise to several of the key literary devices characteristic of Indian drama and literature.

The cyclic view of existence sees life as a continuity, so that there is no end, even after death. This view creates several consequences, for it conditions visions of ‘reality’ and of attitudes to time, and it ordains life’s purpose, and these consequences are in turn reflected in literary style and theme. Endings are also beginnings; the past and future exist in the present. An example typifying this style can be found in one of the best-known Sanskrit plays, Shakuntala. The Epics (and Shakuntala itself) have

continued to be widely read, retold as story, scripture and mythology, analysed and enacted in every media, borrowed as allusion even in modern forms of fiction. They are beloved of all sects and communities of India and are the basis of popular community festivals.

The great 5th century poet Kalidasa dramatised a tale from the *Mahabharata* which tells of the love between King Dushyana and beautiful Shakuntala, the daughter of an *apsaras* (a heavenly maiden) and a *rishi* (a holy seer). Although Kalidasa is known for his descriptions of sensuous human love, in which he departs from the commonly used allegory of love as the soul in search of God, this story still engages many devices that unseat a purely material reading of reality. Sublime poetic language exalts the natural world to a vividness which enhances the dreamlike quality as the characters move from forest to palace to heavenly realms. Time brings change, though past and future always co-exist in this inclusive metaphysical view. Vision zooms from the intimate glisten of water-beads on the mango buds, to the lofty panorama of the great mountains, which ‘bathe their feet in two oceans’. This style creates self-reflexive frames for the scenes it envisions, so that the audience (or reader) is reminded of their position of viewer; at the same time the audience is directly addressed so that they also become participants in the story. Moreover, most of the characters in the drama also show awareness of themselves as onlookers, as they comment on the events. This ‘framing’ device is well illustrated by the scene where the King gazes at a painting he himself has made of Shakuntala:

King: Which one would you take for Shakuntala?
Jester: Well, I presume that is Shakuntala who is leaning apparently tired, against that mango tree whose shoots glisten as if just watered; she, extending her arms gracefully, with drops of perspiration on her face and the flowers of her unfastened locks at her feet. And I suppose the other two are her friends.
King: You surmise rightly. Observe a mark of my passion on this very picture. My moistened hand has soiled its edge. My tear has dimmed her glowing cheek.
(To Chaturika) Chaturika, the pleasure ground is only half painted. Go, fetch the brush that I may complete it. 96

Here, realities overlap. The King has created the ‘reality’ seen in the picture, but the flesh-and-blood King’s tears and passion-moistened hand have interacted with the painted Shakuntala, and ‘dimmed her glowing cheek’. The vision is not completed (echoing the incompletion of the King’s story of his love for Shakuntala) and he knows he must act to do so. He wants to gaze upon her image constantly, and speaks of the scenes he will paint, transporting the audience with images of rivers and hills far away. But, in an aside, the Jester ponders the King’s confusion, saying, ‘Surely, like a madman he has forsaken the reality for a mere shadow’. The King and the Jester both soon compound this \textit{maya} when, looking closely at the painting, they see a bee flying near Shakuntala’s face.

The King orders the Jester to drive away ‘that bold insect’, but the Jester replies that that is the King’s job, and insistently they argue until the King threatens the bee, ‘Touch not my darling’s purple lip … or I will sure shut you within your lotus cup!’ At this, the Jester, who has also been caught up in this fantasy, responds aloud ‘But don’t you see that it is only a picture?’ The King, jolted out of his dream, cries ‘What a picture!’ Sanumati, a celestial nymph who has been, invisibly, watching the scene unfold, states ‘Even I did not discover it: how much less should he?\textsuperscript{97}

Everyone has been, at least momentarily, confused by the layers of reality. The audience looks into a scene where a King looks into another scene (he has created) which is a recollection of a past scene, which becomes alive in the present. It is typical of traditional Indian dramatic style, which twentieth century poet-scholar A. K. Ramanujan summed up aptly in the title of his essay ‘Where Mirrors are Windows’.\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., p. 263.
Furthering this theme, Sanumati has been providing comment on the unfolding scene ‘from above’, so to speak, as has the Jester as ‘an insider’, both implicating the audience in the enjoyment and the balancing of moral sympathy about the King’s plight. These layers of reality create a framing affect, which locates the players relative to the wider world, reminding us that this particular incident is part of a complex unity of time and space. It is shown for its reality, as a ‘measured’ incident but also a microcosm, a cross-section of the totality of life with which it merges and flows. The device of using framed pictures as part of the narrative is quite common in Sanskrit drama, supporting this imagery that any given moment of ‘reality’ is but a fragment of the greater continuing ‘play’ of life. A similar effect is produced by the framing of a drama by its introduction: Valmiki, mythological composer of the Ramayana, recites the story of how he came to write the Epic, and later, he tells the whole saga to Rama’s twin sons, who later tell Rama himself his history.

So, in Shakuntala, as in so many other plays and stories of Indian provenance, there are layered versions of events as assessed by different spectators or participants, spoken vivid evocations of other places, thoughts pondered aloud, portents of the future, and vignettes of the past – stories within a story, such as the King’s explanation to the Jester of how Shakuntala came to lose the ring, and its chance retrieval by the fisherman. This all-inclusiveness, this torrent of vision, action, and emotion, is reminiscent of the account in the Bhagavata Purana of Krishna’s mother, Yashoda, looking into her son’s mouth, seeing:

… the whole universe, with the far corners of the sky, and the wind, and lightning, and the orb of the earth with its mountains and oceans, and the moon and stars, and space itself; and she saw her own village and herself. She became frightened and confused, thinking, ‘Is this a dream or an illusion fabricated by God? Or is it a delusion in my own mind? For God’s power of delusion inspires in me such false beliefs as, “I exist”, “This is my husband”, “This is my son”’.

Clearly, the *maya* of the world is laid out in these often-repeated themes, both directly through references to ‘illusion’ and indirectly as it is swept aside in the uplifting *rasa* experience (perhaps, simply, self-forgetting pleasure). Transcending *maya* also means envisioning life in its unity, wherein interconnected elements form the wholeness, and divisions of dimension, time or even that of audience and actor become unnecessary. This transporting experience is of the essence of Indian dramatics, whether performed in theatre, temple, or village square.

Theatrical performance is instructive, too, in its representation of life and its choices, depicting the good and bad actions of Gods and humans, and their motives, and the resulting outcomes. In this manner, theatre demonstrates *dharma*, the correct path through life, which is so important in a culture which holds the view that all sentient and non-sentient beings are interdependent: their actions are consequential for all others. The highest responsibility is therefore the striving to perfect one’s *dharma*, not only for the ultimate goal of personal liberation, but to maintain *rita*, universal order. Order is the finale of Indian dramatics – misunderstandings are resolved, mistakes righted, so that all is as it should be, *dharma* restored, wholeness achieved. Tragedy is a genre uncommon to Indian theatre, for any outcome achieved in this life will be changed in the next anyway.

Hence, ‘finale’ is possibly an inappropriate word for a theatre which is grounded in the view of life as *samsara*, that is, where any single life is merely an episode in a longer chain. Moreover, ‘no single life makes ultimate sense in itself, but the chain of lives does; and this chain, in turn, is contrasted to a higher condition of release from it all, to a reality outside it’.\(^{100}\) The ‘reality outside it’ is always suggested through the devices of Indian theatre, where to be caught in one picture frame is an apt metaphor for the trap of *maya*, a trap of ‘forgetting’ into which the characters often fall.

The ideal of following the path of *dharma* is foundational to Indian theatre as it is to much of its literature generally, so that characters are ‘types’ rather than individualised portraits. The *Ramayana*, for instance, holds up the characters of Lord

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Rama and his wife Sita as the perfect proponents of dharma; here, as in theatrical characterisation, it is the model of human behaviour that matters, rather than an accurate portrayal of lives as they were actually lived. Yet as Farley Richmond concludes in his study of Sanskrit theatre:

The values and mores of the culture are encapsulated in the plays and should be carefully scrutinized for what they teach us about ancient Indian life, and even for what they say about the continuity between ancient and modern life.¹⁰¹

Maya is creation, and the craft of creation: all art is maya. All creation and art is an expression, an emanation, of the divine, which is variously described as Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram (all that is true, good and beautiful) or Sat-cit-ananda (truth, being, bliss). The emphasis that is placed on the bliss of beauty is inescapable in Indian literary and plastic arts. It encompasses the kama (pleasure) principle, one of the ‘Four Ends’ of human endeavour of brahmanic Hinduism (the other ‘ends’ being dharma, duty, artha, wealth or material well-being, and moksha, perfection or liberation). The science of kama was elaborated in the kamashastras, one of which is the famous book of aphorisms on love, the Kama Sutra. As in all Indian arts, nothing was left to chance in the art of erotics, so that ‘the normal man did not degenerate into an epicure or a profligate’.¹⁰² Every aspect conducive to pleasure was detailed in the Kama Sutra. The nagaraka (the civilized individual) was advised on all aspects of a sensually aesthetic life, from household arrangements – ‘a fine couch, with two pillows, pliant at the centre, having a pure white sheet’ – to instructions on sexual congress, the author even classifying the types of scratches that may be incurred through its passion!¹⁰³

Bhakti embraced the analogy of human passion in all its beauty, as typified by the amorous poem of the love of Krishna and Radha, the Gita Govinda; and passion became the poetics of rasa. The theme of sensuality is abundant throughout Indian

¹⁰² de Bary, op. cit., p. 253.
¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 255.
cultural history as, also, is that of ascetism. Apart from its reflection of historical influences, this seeming contradiction is actually not so, in a worldview where opposites are simply complementary halves of the whole – where a God is both male and female, preserver and destroyer. In this view there can be ‘no ultimate antagonisms, for good merges with evil and spiritual with physical, as day into night and night into day. Life can never become wholly bright nor dark, spiritual nor material, good nor ill’.

Asceticism holds its own appeal for those of that persuasion, and that too is celebrated in Indian art. Yet the sexually explicit carvings on some temples, such as those at Khajuraho, the voluputously rounded human forms so identified with Indian sculpture and painting, the delight in the natural world of mountains and rivers, flower garlands and birds, bright flowing clothing and bejewelled women – all reveal the ‘vibrant passion for physical beauty which for Hindus was an expression of the spiritual’.

Beauty, and its sensuality, is another unifying link with the divine, a constant reminder in this philosophy that the created world of *maya* is both gift and symbol of that which is the enduring reality. Lakshmi, or Shri, is the epitome – the Goddess – of beauty and wealth, of the world’s bounty, in short, and is unsurprisingly a favourite deity of the present day. It cannot be thought that India is ‘world rejecting’ even while the world is *maya*.

The nature of the world as *maya* is emblematic of India’s arts. V. Raghavan has written that ‘In no country of such vast dimensions could the countryside be found to be so imbued with the teachings of the religion of the land as in India … the teeming millions … were never uninformed or uncultured’. Through recitation in temples, village squares or *mathas* (teaching centres), through devotional song, the poetry of wandering bards and the patronage of the arts by kings, through dance, drama, sculpture, and painting, the unbroken tradition embodied by the Epics and Puranas, which motivated the major forms of art, has been handed down through many centuries. The mythologies encompass and broadcast Indian religious/philosophical teachings; their influence has been incremented by their adaptation to regional

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104 H. W. Wells, op. cit., p. xxiii.
105 Gargi, op. cit., p. 23.
107 ibid., p. 131.
histories and tongues, and increasingly so by modern technologies. The mythologies
remain a point of reference for Indian collective consciousness in the present day.

*Maya* as word provides a whole conceptual field of meaning; as concept it
provides the philosophic ground to the structural devices and rules of artistic form. As
a key principle in the idea of ‘the one and the many’ which Kapila Vatsyayan cites as
foundational to Indian art through its conjunction with speculative thought,\(^{108}\) *maya* is
essential to the urge to reintegration, to wholeness, which was demonstrated by
architectural design in the still-consulted *Vastu* and *Shilpa Shastras*. The same
structural motif lies in the conception of Indian classical dance: the desire to recreate
the reality beyond the fleeting world of time and manifestation, the limited world,
that is the *maya* of duality and separation. Touching, remembering, tasting the infinite
beyond the finite is inherent in words terms as *darshan*, *rasa*, *Om*, *tirtha*, and in the
concrete symbols of *alamkara* and *murti*. Beauty and perfection in all undertakings
connects to the *brahman* beyond *maya*. Mirage, illusion, and trickery are constant
themes in Indian stories, reminders of *maya* too. Ideas of time are conditioned by the
nature of life as *samsara*, the wheeling repetition of days and lives within the bounds
of *maya*. In this world view, ‘all is a stage and all is a sign’, acting out and indicating
the eternal.\(^{109}\)

‘The eternal’ is Truth (*sat*). Humans in search of that truth are also actors on the
stage of life, who, if aware of *maya*, must also be aware that they *act*, taking on
guises to suit their roles, and, as the ‘decoration’ of *alamkara*, to symbolise and
express an inner vision. Since philosophy, art and other life aspects are
interconnected, let us take as the model of human *maya* one such actor and truth­
seeker, the well known historical figure of M.K. Gandhi. While playing the part of
son, husband, lawyer, teacher, ascetic, rebel, and politician, amongst others, Gandhi
became, too, the ‘Father of India’, and the *Mahatma* or ‘Great Soul’. In his search for
his own and the nation’s truth, Gandhi was a man illustrative of his times in an India
assessing both its past and its future. He bridged the ideologies of tradition and

\(^{108}\) Kapila Vatsyayan, ‘Dance or Movement Techniques of Sanskrit Theatre’ in Rachel Van M. Baumer and
46.

\(^{109}\) Saskia Kersenboom-Story, op. cit., p. xvii.
modernity while he sought, also, to bridge the world of *maya*. Gandhi’s consciousness of *maya* is one proof of its sincere application, his life exemplifying *maya* in realms both personal and political. It is that example, leading towards the era of India’s independence, that is addressed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER THREE

Maya and Gandhi’s Truth

If I have been caught by maya and know it, how then can it be maya? ... I gain peace praying to God to save me from maya.¹

The above quotation from M. K. Gandhi illustrates his awareness of the danger of maya: its deceptive appearance. Notably, though, Gandhi himself used the ‘art’ of maya, its ‘magical, transformative power to construct, and to dissolve realities”² in his creation of new selfhood, for himself and for India. It was an endeavour that remains strongly etched in India’s historical (and mythological) memory, with Gandhi’s final ‘appearance’ as the saintly ascetic, the Mahatma, given statued form in the crossroads and public squares of countless Indian towns.

At first thought it appears strange to associate the deceptive notion of maya with M. K. Gandhi, the symbol and ‘saint’ of India’s freedom struggle, whose life’s mission he proclaimed was the search for truth. Truth and maya are two sides of the same coin, and from Gandhi’s commentaries it is clear he understood this very well. Maya is a perspective on the nature of truth; it helps to define truth when that which is ultimately true is apprehended as brahman, the unchanging origin of all things, and maya is its changing, manifest aspect. It is an interesting juxtaposition to assess Gandhi’s actions, in this case the well-recognised symbolic intent of his appearance – his manner of dress – with maya in mind.³ Doing so achieves two purposes. It is an opportunity to illustrate the valuable idea that maya is, while providing a fresh reading of Gandhi’s famous ‘experiments with truth’: how much was the Mahatma an exponent of illusion, and how much its victim? He himself warned of the dangers of maya, quoting stanzas from the Gujarati poet Akha Bhagat that centre on the lines:

³ The symbolic and political intention of Gandhi’s attire has been well documented and analysed, although not for my purposes of illustrating the idea of maya. See in particular Emma Tarlo, Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, pp. 62 – 128. Tarlo lists other scholarship on Gandhi’s dress code, pp. 62- 63.
Subtle \textit{maya} is a silent sword
Killing pleasantly;
Once she plunges, she will not withdraw,
She eats up a learned scholar from within.

As pointed out earlier, \textit{maya} does take many forms, being the whole passing show of creation, wondrous in its mysterious transformations, and deceptive in its impermanence. It is the metamorphosis that is known by names such as ‘art’ and ‘magic’; it is even the power of metamorphosis that is ‘life’. David Dean Shulman is describing \textit{maya} when he writes of the figure of the clown in South Indian literature, who has a ‘power to transform perception – without transforming reality’ just as the Creator (in \textit{Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.1.20}) is said to:

\ldots weave the world out of and around himself, like the spider. The arachnid metaphor works both ways – the god is both the source and the victim of the creative process of weaving a world, \textit{maya}, in all its beauty and its entangling danger \ldots

The immediacy, or ‘web’, that is \textit{maya} hides the truth, when it could also serve as its signal: it both conceals and reveals. We have seen that India’s treasury of literature is replete with instances of \textit{maya} in its use by gods, demons, and princely heroes alike. Through \textit{maya}, they win power for political gain or personal knowledge, or even to uphold universal stability. If used for such purposes this ancient idea is equated with creating deception, or false appearance, whether for good or ill intent. As the use of illusory display, \textit{maya} is invaluable in the field of politics, and is a much more nuanced concept than the present day one of ‘spin’. It is an illuminating viewpoint for reading political chicanery, for remembering \textit{maya}, one also

\footnote{Akha Bhagat, quoted in Mahatma Gandhi, op. cit., p. 55.}
\footnote{David Dean Shulman, op. cit., p. 167.}
remembers to retain awareness in assessing the apparent nature of situations, so as not to be blindly deceived. So many of India’s religious teachings and traditional stories are precisely that: warnings to remember \textit{maya}. The perception of reality can change in the blink of an eye. Gandhi had recognised the importance of perceptions early in his life, and in his search for truth, knowingly or not, he utilised \textit{maya} as an art, symbolic ‘appearances’ of his own making, as path markers for himself and others.

The path Gandhi took, and wanted the nation to follow, was that which led to his often-stated goal: the Truth he named God. That realization was so entirely his life’s purpose that he proclaimed, ‘I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end’.\textsuperscript{6} For Gandhi, only God was the unchanging, Absolute Truth; human truth was a relative and shifting affair, the \textit{maya} he sought to overcome. One of his apostles explained the illusiveness of true perception, when remembering that ‘… the Taj Mahal looks different to different people, depending on where they’re standing and particularly on what time of day it is. I feel rather like that with Bapu’ (Gandhi as ‘father’). The apostle proceeds to wonder at her uncertain memories of Gandhi – was he small or tall, straight or crooked? At different times he seemed to be all those things.\textsuperscript{7}

How did Gandhi regard this relative truth, the \textit{maya} of the world? Gandhi himself did not translate \textit{maya} as ‘illusion’. Asserting that there was no correct translation for the word,\textsuperscript{8} he suggested instead that, in relation to the phenomenal world, its meaning was closer to ‘appearance’: the material nature of the world belied its true spiritual essence.\textsuperscript{9} The waves of the ocean are not the whole ocean; the sunlight not the Sun. In his \textit{Autobiography}, Gandhi gives an example of \textit{maya} in his description of a great storm that assailed the ship in which he sailed to Natal in 1896. The passengers, in

\textsuperscript{8} Gonda would agree that there is no ‘correct translation’. He writes that interpretations of \textit{maya} are ‘conditioned by their context’. Gonda, op. cit., p. 169.
fear for their lives, had forgotten all their religious differences, and had turned to God for succour. But when the storm abated, great merrymaking ensued, and ‘the momentary mood of earnest prayer gave place to \textit{maya}.\textsuperscript{10} The passengers had quickly dismissed their sober reflection and genuine awareness of life’s impermanence, and once again subsumed themselves in thoughtless pleasures, and in, no doubt, their differences. Gandhi himself was determined to be vigilant in avoiding such a careless attitude. He admitted, though, that occasionally the temptations of the world were allowed, somewhat against his conscience, to override the strict observance of ‘truth’. One instance of this laxity he conceded was that during a long and difficult train journey, he had allowed Kasturbai, his wife, to use the second class bathroom at Kalyan station, although they held only third class tickets. In concluding his account of this indulgence, he added a moralising self-rebuke: ‘The face of truth is hidden behind the golden veil of \textit{maya}, says the Upanishad\textsuperscript{11}.

The \textit{maya} of appearance may obscure the truth but it may, as we have noted above, also be used to suggest or create it. Gandhi had early learnt the relative nature of human truth. He remembered a bitter childhood experience in which he was falsely accused of telling lies, supposedly in order to avoid a gymnastics lesson.\textsuperscript{12} How could his teacher have so wrongly interpreted the appearance of things, and denied Gandhi’s word? The wronged boy took from this incident the lesson that great care must be given to the details of daily life, or else the truth would be misperceived and misrepresented (see Figure 25).

But it is a short step from representing the truth as one sees it to \textit{creating} the same truth. Representations are \textit{maya}, which, we have observed, is both appearance and the art which creates it. Gandhi relates that as a boy he believed fully that the truthful hero Harishchandra, portrayed in the play of the same name, was an actual historical character; as an adult he realised this was not so. Still, he found that for him Harishchandra was a heartfelt ‘living reality’, who continued inspiring Gandhi’s own

\textsuperscript{10} Gandhi, op. cit., p. 179.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 348.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 30.
ideals. In this way art, here a mythology, creates truths and realities. Realising that fact, Gandhi regretted the neglect of his handwriting skill when young. He compared his penmanship unfavourably with the ‘beautiful handwriting’ of young men educated in South Africa, fearing that unattractive handwriting ‘should be regarded as a sign of an imperfect education’. Whether this concern stemmed from reasons of pure aesthetics, self-image or repute, or from his steadfast inclination to perfection (as truth) is debatable, but certainly the statement reveals his attraction to the notion of ‘appearance’ as revelatory of deeper truths. Conversely, he realised that appearances may contrive to create these truths, as was to be clear from his life thereafter.

The young and shy Mohandas Gandhi who sailed to England to undertake a study of law had a noticeable (and understandable) penchant for dressing in the manner he considered to be appropriate to his surroundings. There can be no doubt that this acute consciousness stemmed largely from the necessity of finding acceptance in a culture so unfamiliar. England had impressed a belief in its own racial, cultural, and moral superiority both at home and abroad, and held indisputable economic and political hegemony throughout its Empire. Gandhi remembered well that during his high school days a group of Christian missionaries would stand on a street corner, ‘pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods’. His experiments with meat-eating were largely motivated by a desire to become as strong as these English conquerors, who ate meat, and who accused Indians of an effeminate weakness. So already the young Gandhi, still in the thrall of admiration for the English way, was conditioned with the idea of showing himself to be their equal, while simultaneously proving it to his own unsure self. The *maya* of appearance was important, especially as dress was one distinguishing element the imperial power had upheld while distancing itself from the ‘uncivilised native’. It was an embarrassing start to Gandhi’s sojourn abroad then, to step ashore from the ship at Southampton and travel to London in a white flannel suit, ‘the only person wearing such clothes’.

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13 Ibid., p. 23.
14 Ibid., p. 31.
15 Ibid., p. 46.
16 Tarlo, op. cit., pp. 36-39.
Grappling with the language, dietary and social differences of a foreign land, Gandhi experimented with new ideas, food, and dress. In his desire to ‘look the thing’ he went to great efforts and expense, discarding his Bombay cut clothes and buying those of an English gentleman, along with tie, top hat, and gold watch chain; he struggled to arrange his hair fittingly and for several months undertook lessons in elocution, dancing, and violin to complete the picture. But, importantly, he noted (in the hindsight of writing his Autobiography) the somewhat contradictory feelings that although this time had been a ‘period of infatuation’ the experiments of style were not a ‘stage of indulgence’ and that ‘even then I had my wits about me’. He was creating an appearance (maya) to enhance his own development and self-confidence, as much as to depict a figure acceptable in the eyes of British society. Despite the time spent in front of the mirror perfecting his image of an English gentleman, (perhaps lost temporarily in the maya of vanity!), Gandhi wrote that he had soon concluded that character, not appearance, would make him a gentleman. But his emphasis on appearance, on the symbolic accoutrements that are, in effect, alamkara, remains undeniably noticeable throughout his life and in his Autobiography. This unremitting consciousness of the power of image is demonstrated in Gandhi’s description of the writer Narayan Hemchandra, whom he met in London:

His dress was queer – a clumsy pair of trousers, a wrinkled, dirty, brown coat after the Parsi fashion, no necktie or collar, and a tasselled woollen cap. He grew a long beard … Such a queer-looking and queerly dressed person was bound to be singled out in fashionable society.

That condemnatory judgement was put to the test when Gandhi accompanied Hemchandra to an appointment with the admired humanitarian, Cardinal Manning. Gandhi’s brief account of this visit is prefaced by a description of his own clothes (‘the usual visiting suit’) and by noting Hemchandra’s failure to dress differently for

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18 Ibid., p. 63.
19 In the previous chapter, alamkara, ornament, has been shown to be the ‘decoration’ that reifies the qualities inherent in a person, god, or object, and through which it is more truly known. Gandhi’s ‘ornament’ of English dress was the outward expression of his desire to attain qualities of ‘Englishness’.
20 Gandhi, Autobiography, p. 81.
the important occasion. Gandhi reports that he ‘tried to make fun of this’, clearly feeling discomfited by Hemchandra’s unorthodox appearance. But Hemchandra pins down Gandhi’s *maya*, saying, ‘You civilized fellows are all cowards. Great men never look at a person’s exterior. They think of his heart.’

It seems Narayan Hemchandra’s refusal to adopt contrived external trappings maintained a strong impression on Gandhi’s mind even decades later, for his continued account of his friend devotes an inordinate amount of space to his appearance and its effect. Gandhi’s London landlady was ‘in a fright’, telling him ‘a madcap wants to see you’, when Hemchandra appeared at his front door wearing a dhoti. Gandhi himself was ‘shocked’ at the sight, and questioned Hemchandra as to whether he had been harassed by children in the street owing to his dress. Later, Gandhi reports, when Hemchandra visited the United States he was actually prosecuted for being ‘indecently dressed’ while wearing a similar shirt and dhoti. Perhaps it was the unapologetic Hemchandra’s native dress code, at-odds as it was in the western world of the late nineteenth century, that helped sow the seeds of Gandhi’s later adoption of a determinedly simple Indian style of clothing as an element of his *Swadeshi* principle. But that was to come several personas later – after his personal quest for truth became entangled with the political, triggered by his experiences in South Africa where he had travelled to work.

Almost immediately the *maya* of dress code – the power of its symbolism – struck the new arrival’s sensibilities in his early days in Durban (see Figure 23, Figure 24 and Figure 27). Once again, Gandhi was acutely conscious of his own appearance, feeling that his Bengali frock-coat and turban marked him out from the other Indians. The turban, as it turned out, was a distinguishing hierarchical and racial marker, which Gandhi was requested to remove in the District Court because he was merely a lowly Hindu or ‘coolie’ barrister. Muslims and Parsees were permitted to retain their turbans. At first Gandhi in his insecurity decided to wear a hat to avoid the issue, but was dissuaded from this course by his employer, Abdulla Sheth, who pointed out that

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21 Ibid., p. 83.
22 Ibid., p. 84.
23 *Swadeshi*: the use of only that which is produced locally.
Gandhi would lose status as he would then be associated with the hat-wearing Indian Christians, who mostly worked as hotel waiters. Some time later though, in the Supreme Court, Gandhi did agree to remove his turban, and cited this compromise as an example of ‘the principle of looking at a thing from a different standpoint in different circumstances’. In saying that, Gandhi reiterated his awareness of the relativity, the shifting nature, of truth in the phenomenal world, as well as being commonsensical. That attitude of truth’s relativity was no doubt in part an aspect of Gandhi’s Jain heritage, but one he had incorporated in his own considered philosophy. In Hind Swaraj he had written that:

[w]hen we are slaves, we think that the whole universe is enslaved. Because we are in an abject condition, we think that the whole of India is in that condition … we can see that if we become free, India is free.

Gandhi’s art of \textit{maya} was his deliberate portrayal of whichever identity he deemed would prove most effective in gaining influence, to serve the community most capably. His wife Kasturbai and his sons had to acquiesce to his ideas of appropriate attire, uncomfortable though they may have been. Returning with the family to South Africa, Gandhi oversaw their outfitting in the clothes of Parsis (then regarded by imperial eyes as the ‘most civilized’ of Indian peoples). These clothes were completed, of course, with shoes and stockings, to which the family were unaccustomed, and found painful. Was this deliberate act of disguise Gandhi’s much-proclaimed truth? It is not unexpected that a stranger in new surroundings will adapt habits of clothing and other customs to acclimatise more easily, but Gandhi was so particular in doing this that he has become renowned, amongst other vastly more admirable qualities, for the politically charged symbolism of his clothes His eye for appearance is prominent throughout his \textit{Autobiography}, the pages on ‘Lord Curzon’s Durbar’ being no exception.

\textsuperscript{24}Gandhi, \textit{Autobiography}, op. cit., p. 145.
\textsuperscript{26}Gandhi, \textit{Autobiography}, p. 177.
The symbolic resonance of clothing, which lends a quality of manipulability and deception, is made clear by Gandhi’s unhappy account of the dress of the Rajas and Maharajas in attendance at two separate durbars (public receptions), those of Lord Curzon and Lord Hardinge. In the first case, some of the Indian royalty had come attired in the type of turbans and trousers worn by waiters, in protest at their subordinate status to their British overlords. In the second case, Gandhi was ‘distressed to see the Maharajas bedecked like women’ in silks, diamonds, and pearls.27 They were obliged to do so, he was told, for these grand Raj functions. Here the British performed a *maya* of their own, creating a vision of splendour to lend credence to their authority.

Dress everywhere, and especially in India, has long been a revealing signatory of rank and status, of place – of identity. It cannot be denied that the symbolic and distinguishing elements of dress were important in the climate of heightened one-upmanship over identity, as Indians strove to demonstrate their ability to be self-governing and to reach a consensus of definition regarding their future nation. Certainly Gandhi recognised the need for a symbolic model to raise the esteem of both individual and nation. But sometimes his focus on attire can seem almost obsessive and disproportionate, and even insensitive. He describes going to the house of a Christian Indian, Babu Kalicharan Banerji, in Calcutta:

… I found that his wife was on her death-bed. His house was simple. In the Congress I had seen him in a coat and trousers, but I was glad to find him now wearing a Bengal *dhoti* and shirt. I liked his simple mode of dress, though I myself then wore a Parsi coat and trousers.28

*An Autobiography* is certainly meant to be instructive, so compassion, especially in Gandhi’s schema, would be warranted. Yet the death of the poor wife seems to be brushed aside as merely incidental, while the more ‘pertinent’ matter of clothes is addressed. Perhaps Gandhi is lost in his own *maya*, his (understandable perhaps)

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27 Ibid., p. 217.
28 Ibid., p. 220.
focus on his own agenda, so that he at times ‘cannot see the wood for the trees’?29

Surely, in this instance of a personal and not public interaction, the clothes worn by
the protagonists are not a particularly important issue, even though the Christian faith
of Kalicharan Banerji may have stood for a degree of westernisation (in dress) which
Gandhi was pleased not to have found in this visit.

But Gandhi was not ‘nativist’ in his attitudes to Indian attire, asserting it must be
symbolic of truth rather than creating false representations. For that reason he
declined to wear the sacred thread which distinguishes high caste Hindus from the
lowest caste, the shudras; he felt this would perpetuate ‘untruthful’ divisions within
humanity. But he allowed that the symbolism of the sacred thread should be worn by
anyone seriously pursuing ‘spiritual regeneration’, despite expressing doubts that
Hinduism was worthy to claim such aspirants in what he saw as its current degenerate
state.30 In other words, Gandhi believed that the sacred thread and other symbols of
Hinduism were maya, false appearance, for they pretended a truth they did not in fact
live up to. It seems he regarded only himself as properly ‘truthful’ in wearing
symbolic dress in order to generate a desired reality, or to generate the perception of
it in the eyes of others, as was so often his purpose.

Those near to Gandhi were coerced into obeying his sartorial whims, which
sometimes, it seemed, were not founded on the sincere search for truth which (he
proclaimed) must be assessed at every moment, but on personal preference and
emotion. This was apparently the case earlier in his career with two other symbols of
Hindu orthodoxy: the Vaishnava necklace of tulsi beads, and the shikha, the
distinguishing tuft of hair. The shikha Gandhi admits he had shaved off, fearing that
he would look a ‘barbarian’ to English eyes, and similarly, he had persuaded his
cousin to remove his shikha lest it denigrate his public work in South Africa.31 But
when a Quaker friend tried to convince Gandhi to break the tulsi beads he was
wearing, Gandhi refused, because the beads had been a ‘sacred gift’ from his

29 He does recognise this possibility on another occasion when writing a response to a critical letter, he
wonders ‘whether, having fallen a prey to maya, I have not committed adharma in the name of dharma.’ In
31 Ibid., p. 355.
mother. To him, the beads represented his mother’s wishes and her protection; to the Quaker they represented superstitious belief. These instances of asserting a personal preference belie the self-effacement that Gandhi would later claim as being the essence of moksha (salvation). They also further attest to his habituation to the symbolism of adornment – the aforementioned art of alamkara. But these examples are from the young Gandhi’s early ‘experiments with truth’, before he had developed and disciplined the philosophy and self-control which became his hallmark.

It would be surprising if, in developing that philosophy, Gandhi had not known of and considered the story, related in the Mahabharata, of the words spoken by the wise King Janaka to Sulabha, a woman yogi, about truth:

The wearing of brown cloths, shaving of the head, bearing of the triple stick, and the kamandalu [the begging bowl] – these are the outward signs of one’s mode of life. These have no value in aiding one to the attainment of emancipation ... Emancipation does not exist in poverty; nor is bondage to be found in affluence. One attains to emancipation through knowledge alone, whether one is indigent or affluent (Santiparva 177. 26–8).34

Still, the most indelibly etched image of Gandhi, one that continues to hold powerful meaning and which endures the world over, is that of the simple figure in peasant garb of cotton dhoti and shawl, wearing plain metal rimmed glasses, increasingly thin and weakened from his fasts and imprisonments. Often he is pictured leaning upon a walking staff, or with arms around the shoulders of his female acolytes. Gandhi had taken on the dress of the poor Indians during the South African satyagraha, and retained it in India, initially to blend in while travelling third class on the railway. Once again he took care to equip himself with the appropriate disguise: the most basic garments, a cheap canvas bag, and a coarse woollen coat. This is the fully evolved Gandhi as saviour of India, his mission defined, his identity

32 Ibid., p. 124.
33 Ibid., p. 358.
aligned idealistically with the poorest of the poor and with India as a nation (see Figure 26). He was greeted as a saint by many, crowds gathering to take darshan, a sighting and blessing, of him. His semi-nakedness was practical in the heat of central India but also served to illustrate, metaphorically, his increasing lack of separation from the world around him. Winston Churchill may have scathingly called Gandhi a ‘seditious fakir’, but this very image made it more difficult for the government to take a hard line on Indian nationalists, for they had ‘no wish to alienate public opinion by appearing to hound a holy man’. Gandhi’s image (his maya) and his truth had, seemingly, become increasingly one and the same.

We can conclude that, ultimately, Gandhi’s use of maya-as-truth (imagery which creates the reality it suggests) became increasingly pervasive as his course became more firmly set and more practised. It can be observed in the symbolic strengths of the spinning wheel and khadi cloth, in the valiant bid for justice which resulted in the memorable imagery of the Salt March, and in the emotional impact of his fasts for truth and peace, more effective than a thousand words. Famously, Gandhi’s satyagraha principles presented Indians to themselves and the world as courageous, assertive, loving and united, worthy of Swaraj, the self rule of individual and nation that would be the prize of truth-seeking. All these representations created timely arguments and lasting impressions. It was Gandhi’s contemporary, Nobel prize winning poet Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote of Swaraj that:

[i]t is maya; it is like a mist that will vanish, leaving no stain on the radiance of the Eternal ... We are to emancipate Man from the meshes that he himself has woven around him – these organisations of national egoism. The butterfly will have to be persuaded that the freedom of the sky is of higher value than the shelter of the cocoon.36

There are lessons for today’s world in the story of Gandhi’s maya, as the Mahatma, the ‘noble soul’ that he was deemed to have become, had perhaps

36 Rabindranath Tagore, cited in de Bary, op. cit., p. 239.
intended. He knew that humans could do no more than strive to overcome the *maya* (illusory appearance) of this world, *prakriti*, which is itself *maya* (manifestation). In a letter to Kanti Gandhi, written in 1934, he included some lines from the *Ramacharitamanas* of Tulsidas:

The illusory appearance of silver in a mother-of-pearl or of water in the sun’s rays, although unreal at all times, cannot be avoided.

Gandhi observed of this teaching that:

It has had a profound effect on my mind. Man cannot but cling to an illusion so long as it seems truth to him. That is why the world has been described as an illusion and a snare, as *maya*. I will be content if you will always do your best.

Gandhi’s ‘best’ was striving for the Absolute Truth which, ultimately, would allow removal of the ‘cocoon’ of which Tagore wrote, and make recognised the unity of all beings. *Maya*, in regard to that unity, signifies the illusory divisions within humanity made by contesting creeds, castes, nations, or degrees of wealth; it means not caring for other creatures, and it means the falsity of being untrue to – divided against – oneself as individual or nation. So for Gandhi, one’s outer apparel must reflect oneself or one’s intentions as truthfully as possible in any situation. He recognised that human truth is relative, but the differences implicit in that understanding are contained within the non-duality that is beyond the *maya* of differentiation. Gandhi’s policy of *ahimsa* (non-violence) arose from his perception of unity-as-truth, as did his acquisition of a simple lifestyle; for if each being’s life affects the other, then non-violence and non-greed can be the only truthful way. Violence and greed would create barriers of separation between those who have and those who have not, those who wield power and those who suffer it.

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37 Bhikhu Parekh. *Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi’s Political Discourse*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1999, p. 288. Parekh comments that Gandhi had evolved to become Mahatma, and in *Autobiography* was looking back at his unevolved self, Mohandas Gandhi.

Above all, *maya*, as a concept, is a reference point. Applying its logic to daily life and to political posturings can be a useful method of clarifying motives and assessing the merits of claims and appearances. It reminds humans to look beyond appearances and take account of the whole story: to widen their vision. Gandhi’s legacy is a testament of faith towards that truth, regardless of the degree of his success. His art of *maya* was conducive to the arrival, finally, of Independence for India, ushering in a new period for the ‘new’ nation. The coming era saw the burgeoning of an industry that would be one of India’s most successful and most self-reflective – cinema – the twentieth century art that is the epitome of *maya*’s illusion making. The manner in which the ancient idea of *maya* has been demonstrated in cinema is informative of many aspects of India’s passage through the demanding changes of post-Independence times, and is for that reason the focus of the following chapter.
Fig. 3.6 Gandhi in 1920, dressed in a khadi kurta and the famous ‘Gandhi cap’ which he invented. Courtesy of NGM.

Figure 23

Figure 24

39 Gandhi and his wife, Kasturbhi, in South Africa. Emma Tarlo, op. cit., p. 69.
40 Ibid., p. 68.
41 Ibid., p. 70.
42 Gandhi with his staff outside his Johannesburg law office. Judith Brown, op. cit., p. 38.
Gandhi age 7, ibid.
Gandhi age 17, ibid.
Gandhi spinning wearing his 'loin cloth'. Emma Tarlo, op. cit., p. 73.