Material religion in contemporary Hinduism

Vasudha Narayanan

Sarasvatī in Embassy Row, Washington DC

An unusual National Public Radio (NPR) story aired in the United States in June 2013. Entitled, ‘A Hindu Goddess Arrives To Bless Embassy Row’, it was certainly exceptional on many levels. The report said:

Winston Churchill graces the grounds of the British Embassy. Outside the Indian Embassy, Mahatma Gandhi looks as though he’s in full stride, clad in loincloth and sandals. And now, there’s a Hindu goddess. Sarasvatī just arrived. She stands in a garden in front of Indonesia’s embassy, glowing white and gold, with her four arms upraised.

NPR 2013 (see Figure 22.1)

Noteworthy, too, is the fact that this sixteen-foot Hindu goddess of knowledge and performing arts is outside the embassy of Indonesia, a predominantly Muslim country, where only 3 per cent of the population is Hindu. Under this statue is a short description of the goddess from the perspective of the Indonesian embassy:

Dewi-Saraswati (Saraswati Goddess) … is portrayed standing straight, facing forward, looking to the right direction, depicting positive thinking based on values of the truth. Universally, Saraswati is known as the Goddess of knowledge and art, embodied as a beautiful woman, as a symbol that science is something beautiful and attractive, in her hands she bring (sic):

- Book-lontar leaf [palm leaf used for book manuscripts in pre-modern India] symbolizing knowledge
- Mandolin symbolizing art and culture
- Aksamala/ rosary/tasbih beads symbolizing unlimited knowledge
- Lotus flower symbolizing holiness
- Swan symbolizing wisdom.1
Hindus all over the world worship the goddess Sarasvati; and while most Hindus (more than 800 million) live in India, there are large numbers in many parts of the world. Sarasvati, in fact, is the main deity enshrined in the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center of Champaign, Illinois, USA and one of the primary deities at the Manav Mandir Temple, Merritt Island, Florida. Hinduism has to be studied as a global religion and all people from the sub-continent have been inextricably connected with other countries for millennia. Hindu philosophies and practices have been in Southeast Asia for about 2,000 years and it should not surprise us that Sarasvati, a very tangible expression of the tradition, is outside the Indonesian, and not the Indian embassy. And thus, while this chapter focuses on material culture primarily in contemporary India, many themes and discussions will be drawn from and also be relevant in understanding contemporary global Hindu traditions.

Using the Sarasvati image in Embassy Row as a segue into a discussion on material religion, we can develop several themes suggested by the statue and the sign under it, and explore their importance in the Hindu traditions in contemporary India. We can also raise questions on the connections between ‘material’ substances, ‘spirit’, and liberation from the cycle of life and death. Does ‘matter’ obstruct the path of the spirit or soul to liberation? Is it fundamentally opposed to the category/categories of ‘spirit/ soul/ God?’ What do the themes suggested by the explanatory plaque under the Embassy Row Sarasvati tell us about the role of material culture in contemporary Hindu practice in India and in other parts of the world? In answering these questions, our discussions will include the following themes:
1 The importance of ‘images’ in the Hindu traditions and their ‘on-your-face’ materiality. What is the ultimate status of ‘matter’ in Indian philosophies?
2 The manuscript and the book in Sarasvatī’s hand, which invite us to think both about knowledge and the publishing industry.
3 Performing arts – as suggested by the vīṇā (‘Mandolin’) in her hand.
4 The image laden festival of navarātri, the nine-night, autumnal festival presided over by the three goddesses, Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Durgā, in South India, with special adoration of Sarasvatī on the penultimate day which, in fact, bears the eponymous name, ‘Sarasvatī Pūjā’.
5 The tasbīh/rosary beads and the swan: what is the difference between the knowledge symbolized by the book and the ‘unlimited knowledge’ and wisdom symbolized by the bird and the beads?

A discussion of these themes will lead us to understand the network of affordances connected with these material objects, which point to a more complex connection between ‘matter’ and ‘spirit’ than a simple polarity. It is certainly true that many Hindu texts recognize a fundamental distinction between ‘spirit’ or souls and primordial matter; the Viṣṇupurāṇa (1.9), a text composed in the first few centuries CE, for instance, hails Viṣṇu (‘the all-pervasive one’) as the supreme soul and as ‘the cause of matter (pradhāna) and spirit (puṃān)’. There are, however, many kinds of materialities, many perspectives on, and even many gradations of these materialities, and at least two categories of ‘spirit’ (a soul that is in the cycle of life and death, and ‘personal God/Supreme Being/brāhmaṇ) in the six ‘orthodox’ schools of Hindu philosophy. These ‘orthodox’ schools of Hindu philosophy, in contra-distinction to those that they classify as being ‘heterodox’ (forms of Buddhist and Jain thought, as well as Cārvāka or materialism) acknowledge the Vedas as the highest authority and source of knowledge.

In our discussions in this chapter, we will work with two large categories (cetana or ‘that with consciousness’ and acetana or ‘that without consciousness’) which are internal categories in Indian philosophy, and which subsume the sub-categories of ‘spirit’ and matter. These discussions are closely tied to ideas of brahmaṇ, or the Supreme Being which, according to some schools, resides in ‘matter’, both inherently, and in special ways through consecration rituals, and also to concepts of what is ‘sacred’ and what is not. A thread that we will valorize in this chapter is that, starting with the ‘orthodox’ schools of Hindu philosophy, almost all forms of matter point to and are even encompassed in the understanding and experience of the supreme deity or brahmaṇ; and the affordances (if one uses this term in a Gibsonian sense) of matter ultimately lie in the path to liberation or mokṣa, variously defined. The denial of anything ‘spiritual’ is seen as the characteristic of the Cārvākas, the only ‘materialist’ school of philosophy. While considering potential functions of matter, which are said to lead one away happily from the snares of this material world and on the path of liberation, we will also pay attention to some political and socio-cultural contexts in which specific manifestations of material objects are created or used in veneration.

It is only through the multifarious deployment of ‘materiality’ that we have constructed, conserved, transmitted, encountered, and experienced the many features of religious and cultural traditions, including Hinduism. Temples, icons, paintings, art, music, texts, performance of recitation, ritual, festivals, are part of the networks of materiality. In discussing these themes, we get multiple perspectives (including some political, philosophical, and sociological contexts) on the materiality and religious culture in contemporary India.

Although the presence of material religious culture in Hindu traditions is palpable, it has to be seen in the context of the many texts that speak about brahmaṇ, the Supreme
Being, which the Upaniṣads (c. sixth century BCE) say is ineffable. The initial paradox is that brahman both is and pervades through the universe. Alexander Duff (1806–1878), a Church of Scotland missionary, a pioneer of education in India was the author of *India and India Missions: Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism Both in Theory and in Practice*. This treatise, published in 1839, was one of the first summaries of Hinduism, and in it, he explains this complex religion to his church colleagues, and to the English-speaking world. Missionaries, ‘Orientalists’ who studied the classical and sacred texts of India, and government administrators, were the major British players in colonial India in the nineteenth century, brokering the knowledge of and interpreting Indian religions to Europe, and also to America. The missionaries had been horrified by their perception of the Hindu worship of ‘idols’; and yet, the ‘Orientalists’ who had been translating the many Hindu texts spoke about the ‘spirituality’ inherent in these works. Duff writes of this paradox thus:

Strange as it may sound in the ears of those who may never have heard of the Hindus but as a nation of polytheists and idolaters, it is, nevertheless, true, that the very foundation of their system is laid in the belief and assertion of the existence of one great universal self-existing Spirit.

_Duff 1839: 74_

The paradox of the ‘materiality’ in practice, and the perception of an underlying ‘spirit’ in the entire universe as gleaned from the Hindu compositions (notwithstanding the materiality of the text itself) is still a conundrum which many schools of Hindu philosophy try to explain.

There is considerable diversity in the understanding of ‘matter’. The Sāṃkhya philosophy perceives the universe as being populated by many spirits and one primordial ‘material’ which then evolves and diversifies into many kinds of material ‘evolutes’. Sāṃkhya greatly influenced the many Vedānta systems of theology and philosophy, such as the Advaita Vedānta and communities such as the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas. The non-dualist Advaita school of thought considers the experiential awareness of the ultimate being as transcending all distinction between spirit and matter. Some traditions think of matter as feminine and as an obstacle to the realization of the spirit. Others think that it is only through matter that one realizes or attains the spirit.

While I will be casting the net wide and draw examples from many Hindu traditions to make my points, I will focus more closely on the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas – a historically important Hindu community which has built hundreds of temples in India and, now, in many places in the world, and which also has a significant corpus of devotional and philosophical texts composed over more than a millennium. Many important Viṣṇu temples in India (including the two richest Hindu temples in the world – the famous ‘Balajī’ or Veṅkaṭeśvara temple at Tirumala – Tirupati, and the Padmanābha Swami temple in Tiruvanāanthapuram), as well as several in Canada, the United States, and Australia, have a Śrī Vaiṣṇava provenance, or follow forms of Śrī Vaiṣṇava rituals. As we will see soon, Rāmānuja (traditional dates 1017–1137 CE), the most important teacher in this tradition, argues that prakṛti which is one form of acetana (‘without consciousness’), and cetana (‘with consciousness’, ‘spirit’), both have ultimate reality because they form the body of brahman, the Supreme Being that pervades and yet transcends the universe. And the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition also has a unique understanding of images and icons, the most ‘material’ form of the deities. But are the ‘images’ that we see in temples all over India and in many parts of the world considered to be ‘matter?’ An understanding of one Hindu perspective gives us an idea of the plural understanding of matter.
Material, non-material, hyper-material: gigantic images and different 'matters'

Although an elegant sixteen-feet tall, the Embassy Row Sarasvatī in Washington DC is quite small in comparison to the mega-statues of deities that have risen all over India. One may argue that the Indian images pale in comparison to the gigantic Buddhas in East Asia; nevertheless, enormous images of many Hindu deities, especially Hanumān, have become extraordinarily popular in many parts of India. In this section we will consider the rising popularity of gigantic images in contemporary India, the prevalence of the iconic presence of deities in Hindu temples all over the world, and the philosophical question of different kinds of 'materiality' in at least some threads of Hindu philosophy.

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain images compete for the dubious record of being among the tallest ones in India. Whereas objects of devotion set in pilgrimage complexes, such as the tenth century CE Jain teacher Gomateśvara (fifty-seven feet) in Sravana Belgola, Karnataka, and the Hindu deity/devotee Hanumān (eighteen feet) in Nammakkal, Tamil Nadu, were once considered to be very tall, they are now relatively small in comparison to the newly built figures. There is an eighty-four feet high statue of the Jain teacher, Ādināth, in Barwani, Madhya Pradesh; and the Vīra Abhaya Añjaneya Hanumān Svāmī (‘Lord Hanumān, heroic son of Añjana, who makes [his devotees] fearless’) made up primarily of concrete, rises to 41 m (135 feet) in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh. These are just a few of the dozens of tall statues of India; so popular is this genre of representation that there are dedicated websites to list the ‘statues over 80 feet tall’ and those just short of 80 feet.

While large images were certainly part of prestige-temples in the past in India, the super-gigantic images seem to be a modern phenomenon. Lutgendorf, in writing in 1994 about the advent of large Hanumāns in the Indian scene underscores the political context of these images:

Given the fluidity and potency of this god, having the biggest Hanuman on the subcontinental block is clearly a goal worth pursuing – but the meanings that can be read into this pursuit are multiple. The rhetoric of late twentieth-century Hindu revivalism appeals to pervasive fears of loss of power; it warns of Hindus ‘becoming a minority’ in their own country and stridently calls for ‘protection’ (rakṣā) – of dharma, cows, and women.

Lutgendorf 1994: 244–245

The political rhetoric embedded in these material depictions of deities is undeniable, but advances in super-materials and technology (many of these statues have steel reinforcements), as well as the increasing bandwidth of an affluent middle-class population, have also contributed to an inordinate number of such gigantic images in India and in some diasporic communities, such as Trinidad. There is no doubt that at least on one level such large statues are made for the same reasons why large ‘prestige’ temples were created in India and in Southeast Asia for millennia: on the one hand, they exude social power and cultural capital, and on the other, they make strong political statements.

Is this Sarasvatī in Embassy Row – or are any of the gigantic images that have been raised in India, or even the smaller icons enshrined in the temples – ‘God’?, what form of reality do they embody or represent? Arguably, one of the most striking features of the Hindu traditions is the full-fledged depiction of deities in human, animal, plant, and fossil ‘forms’; and this was probably one of the most important parts of the tradition that the Muslim and colonial/Christian rulers in India could not quite understand.
As has been discussed in several forums, Hindus apprehend the material forms of deities in multiple ways. The Vīraśaiva community and the Brahmo Samaj, for instance, do not venerate the deity in the form of an image in a temple, even though the Vīraśaivas do worship Śiva in the form of a liṅga. On the other hand, the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community believes that Viṣṇu and Śrī are present on this earth in a temple in the same manner as they are in heaven; and between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, this tradition also developed a theology that articulated a seamless relationship between the manifestation of the universe, the external manifestation of the deity in the temple, and the inner embodiment of God within the devotee’s own heart. Rāmānuja, the most important theologian of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community, builds his philosophy on texts that many Hindus accept as authoritative (such as the Vedas, the Upaniṣads, Bhagavadgītā, and the Brahma-sūtra) and argues that all souls (sentient beings) as well as insentient material form the body of brahman, the Supreme Being (Carman 1974; Lipner 1986: 85–86; Srinivasa Chari 1994: 60–62; Thibaut 1890: 419–424; 457–463 etc.). In fact, the very meaning of ‘Viṣṇu’ is ‘all pervasive’, and his immanence through space and time, matter and spirit, is an important part of the Śrī Vaiṣṇava community’s world view.

Later Śrī Vaiṣṇava theologians also write that Viṣṇu has two kinds of bodies: on the one hand, the entire universe is his body; and on the other, he also takes specific physical forms, as in his descents (avatāras) as Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, and in his incarnations in the worshipable form (arcāvatāra) enshrined in temples (Srinivasa Chari 1994: 207–232; Narayanan 1985). Although the image in the temple may be made of earthly material, it is a real body of Viṣṇu, just as the entire universe is also a body of Viṣṇu. Far from regarding the temple image as a body made of stone or hewn out of rock, the Śrī Vaiṣṇava understands the image to be made of a non-earthly transcendent substance, a kind of hyper-material which is unique to the deity and is made perceivable on earth only by virtue of Viṣṇu’s desire to be accessible to his devotees. This manifestation of Viṣṇu, however, does not exist in contradiction to, nor is it lesser than his manifestation in the heart of the devotee. Further, some Śrī Vaiṣṇava theologians like Piḷḷai Lokācārya (thirteenth-century) ultimately understand the external manifestations in temples to be superior to all other forms of God (Narayanan 1985: 62–64).

Piḷḷai Lokācārya’s younger contemporary, Vedānta Deśika (1268–1368), clearly articulates this philosophical description of the various gradations of matter and spirit, giving us one distinctive Hindu perspective of how they fit in the grand scheme of things. There are other systems of Indian thought which have also addressed this issue. Śaṅkara (c. eighth century) expounded a philosophical system, Advaita (‘non-dualism’) which is better known outside the Indian sub-continent in many registers. According to this philosophical school, which is further expanded on by Śaṅkara’s followers, the manifest universe (including all its material components) is, from the higher perspective of liberation, without ultimate ‘reality’; that is, it is something which is part of a wondrous illusion. Other philosophical world views on spirit-matter which are well known from the Śaṅkhya and Śaṅkhya-Yoga schools. These darśanas hold that the universe is comprised of innumerable puruṣas (spirit/souls) which are enmeshed in the non-conscious prakṛti or primordial matter. The two are forever distinct but real, and the puruṣas only get liberation when they extricate themselves from prakṛti. As Jacobsen explains:

The purpose of the Śaṅkhya system of thought is to show by rational arguments the possibility of realizing the truth that consciousness is and has been separate from matter. The material manifestations of the world are a real transformation of matter,
but the association of consciousness and matter, which leads to the manifestation of the world, is ultimately not real, but is based on ignorance. When puruṣa has been known, the manifestations of prakṛti dissolve in prakṛti. Sāṃkhya does not deny the reality of matter, but claims that every individual has a consciousness part and a material part, and that the consciousness part is eternal and unchanging while the material part is eternal and changing. Change is associated with pain, duḥkha, and absence of change with freedom.

Jacobsen 2015: 52

Rāmānuja and his followers differ from Śaṅkara in holding the universe as real because it – including matter – is brahman/Viṣṇu’s body. Rāmānuja’s position is also different from the Sāṃkhya-Yoga variations in that he insists on the ultimate connectedness and unity between brahman/Viṣṇu, souls or conscious beings (cetana) and non-conscious (acetana) materials, and does not subscribe to the fundamental puruṣa-prakṛti dichotomy of the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition. Rāmānuja’s followers also expand upon these categories and introduce gradations in the ‘non-conscious’ substances present in the universe. Deśika, like Rāmānuja, says that the supreme brahman or Viṣṇu is the soul, the ātman of the entire universe. He further says that Viṣṇu is eternally and continually united with Śrī or Laksṇī, the goddess, and together, they pervade the universe, just as our souls pervade our human bodies. The universe – the divine body of Viṣṇu – is divided into cetana and acetana. Here, we do not see the term ‘living’ or ‘spirit’ as different from ‘matter’; brahman encompasses both, resolving the paradox in this philosophical system. In turn, cetana and acetana are further sub-divided into more categories. Conscious beings (cetana) include three kinds of souls – the eternally and always liberated celestial devotees of Viṣṇu; those beings who were originally bound by karma and who have now reached liberation; and finally, those – like most of us human and animal forms now alive – which are still bound to the cycle of life and death.

But what is the philosophical status of ‘matter’ or ‘material substance’? Vedānta Deśika divides acetana into jaḍa (‘inanimate’) and ajaḍa (‘not-inanimate’). All jaḍa is divided into ‘matter’ (prakṛti) and ‘time’ (kāla). There is only one example of ajaḍa – that which is ‘not-inanimate’ (but which is not ‘animate’ either). This, according to Deśika, is a form of hyper-material, or stuff that transcends all matter; Deśika calls it śuddhasattva or exclusive, ‘pure’ purity. This larger philosophical picture of where ‘matter’ and spirit fit in the larger scheme of things can be put schematically thus (see Figure 22.2).

As seen here, there are many gradations of material substances and it is not a simple paradox or distinction between spirit and matter – indeed, even in philosophical schools like Sāṃkhya and Sāṃkhya-Yoga where the distinction between spirit and matter may be the overt position, there are many fine nuances. Deśika talks about a new category which he calls śuddhasattva, a kind of hyper-matter. In many Hindu traditions, and most importantly articulated by the Bhagavadgītā, (particularly Chapter 14), prakṛti, the primordial matter from which the universe is made manifest, has three intertwined strands of qualities (guṇa) inherent in it; these are sattva (purity); rajas (energy, passion, motion); and tamas (darkness, slothfulness, dullness). All three qualities are present always in various proportions in prakṛti – but Deśika’s śuddhasattva is pure, complete sattva, not mixed with and not blemished by the other two qualities, and therefore very different from prakṛti. Śuddhasattva is pure, unadulterated sattva, luminous, a super substance, transcending anything found on earth.

According to Deśika and Piḷḷai Lokācārya, the ‘physical’ bodies of the various incarnations of Viṣṇu such as Rāma or Kṛṣṇa, indeed, the forms of the very worshipable incarnations (arcāvātara) in temples – the forms through which the inexplicable, ineffable brahman, which
pervades the entire universe manifests itself to human beings, is said to be made of this śuddhasattva, this hyper-matter, which is different from all matter as we know it. This sattva or ‘purity’ is, as we saw, is hierarchically higher than the three qualities (guna) driven matter which constitute all living creatures and material things. The raw, regular material from which an image is hewn almost transubstantiates into this super sattva during the rituals of consecration. And yet, this super śuddhasattva is not ‘spirit’, in the sense of it being the ātman, or ‘consciousness’, or cetana either.

The paradox of the worshipable image in the Śrī Vaiṣṇava tradition is that while this manifestation of the deity is so obviously made of stone or metal, it is believed to be aprakṛta or non-material. We are confronted with a paradox: what appears to non-Hindu eyes as the most gross and material representation of the deity is understood by the Śrī Vaiṣṇava to be a divine, auspicious form, composed of a non-material substance that exists only in heaven and in the temple on earth. In Deśika’s articulation, the image must not be regarded as a material object. It is a personal god, luminous, and complete with all auspicious qualities; it is transcendent and supreme, yet easily accessible – a bit of heaven on earth. Thus, Deśika’s – and the Śrī Vaiṣṇava’s – answer to the paradox of spirit and matter is to posit (or recognize, depending on one’s perspective) – a new category which is neither cetana nor prakṛti.

Arguably, the Embassy Row Sarasvatī and some of the tall images in India are not consecrated and thus different from the worshipable, ‘living’ images. And some consecrations are temporary; icons may be infused with divine life during rituals like Gaṇeśa pūjā or Durgā pūjā but this ‘life’ – that is, the presence of the Supreme Being – is said to leave after the worship is over, and the icons become clay or papier mâché again; material which can be immersed in water with due respect. But the lines between consecrated images in temples and images kept in family altars, or even paper pictures of deities, are very fuzzy. Most Hindus today tend to respect all depictions of deities; and all have the potential to be venerated.

Like these deities and printed versions of them, books and paper slide and glide through the seamless spectrum of sacrality in Hindu practices.
Matters that matter

‘Book-lontar leaf symbolizing knowledge’:
respect for books and the print culture

Sarasvatī carries a manuscript in her hand; the Indonesian embassy refers to this as ‘Book-lontar leaf’ [palm leaf used for book manuscripts in pre-modern India] symbolizing knowledge. Paper and books have the affordance of knowledge in multiple senses – both in the initial sense of having an easily discoverable sense of knowledge – specifically of a transformative wisdom, as well as ‘suggesting’ or ‘inviting’ one to a perceived higher path. While very few things are common for all Hindus, one can say that possibly most would think of even printed pictures of deities as worthy of respect and would hesitate, say, if they were asked to put a good picture of Lakṣmī in a shredder. At a much simpler level, even something as starkly material as paper is to be respected in some contexts, because it has the possibility of offering knowledge. Even though in everyday life, Hindus may not think twice about tearing paper or using it for packing, they would avoid touching it with their feet; and if they do so accidentally, they may make a quick gesture of respect. This sentiment is so well recognized that even facile, tongue-in-cheek lists which stereotype Indians in popular culture, consider ‘stepping on a book or paper’ second in lists of prioritized issues that are said to be offensive.

Writing was not considered favourably in India until possibly well into the Common Era (Staal 1979, Brown 1986), and yet, Sarasvatī is seen with a manuscript in hand, a manuscript that conveys to the devotee her knowledge and mastery over letters and the books. In fact, the Guruparampara prabhavam by Pippalakiya Perumal Jiyar, a thirteenth-century biography of many of the Śrī Vaisnava poets and teachers refers to a library as Sarasvatī bhaṇḍāram (‘the storehouse of Sarasvati’; Jiayar 1975: 225). The Indonesian Sarasvatī holding a manuscript in her hand also pushes us to think of the palpable print culture in India; for, although paper and printed books were introduced late, and literacy is not very high in India (64.8 per cent), the field of publication is said to be booming and some of the largest book-fairs in the world are held in Kolkata, New Delhi, and Chennai. But even then, the books displayed even in these fairs are said to be only a fraction of the large numbers that are thought to be produced and statistics are certainly hard to come by (Darnton 2002: 239–240; Pathak 2011). What we do know is that the earliest publications in India, at least in Bengal, the region where a fairly thorough study was undertaken in the mid-nineteenth century, ‘the total output of works in Bengali before 1820 came to only thirty titles, most of them on Hindu religion and mythology’ (Darnton 2002: 241). It is notable that the earliest print publications were in the field of Hinduism; new innovations seem to get blessed, validated, and accepted faster if they popularize religious themes. This was clear when film making was introduced to India in the early twentieth century, and we turn to this plasticity of the performing arts now.

‘Mandolin symbolizing art and culture’:
performing arts in the Hindu traditions

Like the earliest publications in Bengal, many of the earliest movies in India were based on religious narratives. Early titles included Shree Pundalik (Marathi, 1912); Raja Hariyachandra (Marathi, 1913); Keechaka Vadham (‘The slaying of Keechaka’, Tamil, 1918), and so on. Although movies with secular themes quickly became popular, even now, religious themes are explicitly and implicitly woven through Indian movies. Although cinema, the ultimate medium for performing arts became a carrier for the Hindu traditions only in the twentieth century, one can say that the Hindu traditions have been transmitted through the performing
arts for millennia. Thus, when the Indonesian embassy describes the vīṇā in the hand of the Embassy Row Sarasvatī as ‘Mandolin symbolizing art and culture’, we can keep two things in mind; it is not just the content of the performing arts that is frequently suffused with religious culture, but the arts themselves are considered by many Hindus as a path leading one to liberation. The performing arts have embodied the Hindu traditions in multiple ways; cinema and television continued and changed the traditions of music and dance, religiosity, and culture. In text and practice, many Hindus perceive music and dance – the most embodied forms of recreation, sensuality, and religiosity, as palpably offering a network of affordances leading one to mokṣa.

The materiality of the performing arts can be approached in multiple ways from the viewpoints of the performer, the audience, and the observer. The human body carries aspects of Hindu cosmologies and is used as a vehicle for learning about and depicting the Hindu traditions, on the one hand, and as experiencing what is perceived as divine in this life itself. Lutgendorf, discussing the centrality and physicality of the ‘gaze’ and ‘seeing’ in India, emphasizes the substantial nature of these acts:

When Hindu images are crafted, their painted or inlaid eyes are customarily added last and then ritually ‘opened’, establishing the deity within the icon and making him or her available for the primary act of worship, which is ‘seeing/looking’ (darśana; Hindi darśan). In Indian English, people go to temples ‘to take darśan’; Hindi favors ‘to do darśan’ (darśan karṇā) – both idioms imply a willful and tangible act. ‘Darśanic’ contact invites the exchange of substance through the eyes, which are not simply ‘windows of the soul’, but portals to a self that is conceived as relatively less autonomous and bounded and more psychically permeable than in Western understandings.

This seeing can be used as a lens to understand performance and cinema. Second, the aesthetic theories emanating from the Naṭyaśāstra (c. first and second centuries CE), the classical text on dance and drama, speak about the unique ‘taste’ and ‘flavour’ or enjoyment that rises from the performing, the viewing and what happens in between. Here, the primary and individualized human emotions (bhāva) generated by the multifarious experiences of life are transmuted, through their representation by actors in a dramatic spectacle, into universalized emotional ‘flavours’ (rasa) that may be savored by audience members at the safe remove that theater provides.

Referring to Richard Schechner, Lutgendorf argues that ‘Indian theatre is more typically ‘rasa-driven’, and that ‘a familiarity with “rasaesthetics” – a more somatically based understanding of the effect of performed emotions on the spectator – could enlarge the conceptual vocabulary of Western critical theory’ (Lutgendorf 2006: 238).

As a related note, we should note that while Western scholars have long accepted the importance of ‘seeing’, an equally important way in which (what is beheld to be) ‘divine’ is apprehended is through touch. Touch is powerful; so by touching the object of veneration (for example, the threshold of a temple, the feet of holy people, the ārati flame which is used in rituals of adoration) one becomes a receptacle for this power (Glushkova 2015: 118–123). At the same time, the object of veneration – as in the consecrated icons in South Indian
temples – may be considered to be so powerful that lay people are prohibited from touching them; only initiated priests are said to have the strength to bear the power of the ‘live deity’.

Music and dance performances are staples in contemporary Indian television and cinema. Looking further, one can easily see that in the Hindu tradition, music and dance are closely allied with temples; temple walls in India, Cambodia, Bali, and Atlanta portray hundreds of dancers. Dances and architectures depict embodied cosmologies; architecture connects the dance and dancer to the cosmos.

In ‘narrative’ India that is both imagined and perceived, deities and devotees dance the cosmos, dance their relationship to each other, and to the powers of the universe. Kṛṣṇa danced through many moonlit nights with Rādhā and the other cowherd girls; he connects the dancers through devotion and through passion in a cosmic manḍala. He danced on the serpent Kāliya, subduing its ego. Śiva and Pārvatī, the archetypal dancers, paradoxically portray cosmic energy as well as tranquillity. Sarasvatī is, of course, the patron goddess of music and many performing arts.

One of the primary ways in which the transmission of Hindu/Indian culture takes place in temples and in private studios and homes in many parts of the world where Hindus live is through the performing arts, especially a classical form known today as bharata nāṭya. The term ‘bharata nāṭya’ is popularly translated as the ‘drama according to Bharata’ or the ‘dance of India’ and is a name given in the twentieth century to a dance form that existed in South India for several hundred years. To learn classical Indian dances like bharata nāṭya, Odissi, Kuchipudi, or even folk dances like garbā is to learn stories about Hindu gods and goddesses; it is to learn ways of body languages seen in the sub-continent; it is to learn the emotions that are intricately tied into the depiction of the human-divine relationships.

Balasarasvati (‘little Sarasvatī’; 1918–1984), arguably one of the best-known Indian classical dancers of the twentieth century, once compared her dance to the structure of a great temple; perhaps this, above all, illustrates liberation or mokṣa as one possible affordance of performing arts, and one that is most valorized by some Hindus. She compared the alārippu, the first item in the repertoire, to the grand entrance, the majestic tower (gopuram) of a temple. The traditional items that follow – the jatisvaram and śabdam are, she said, like the vestibule, the corridor that leads one to the grand hall in this place of worship. The varṇam, which is the central piece of the recital (it is here that the artist depicts the soul’s passion for the Supreme Being), is the piece that gets one close to the inner shrine. ‘This is the space’, she said,

which gives the dancer expansive scope to revel in the music, rhythm and moods of the dance. The varṇam is the continuum which gives ever expanding room to the dancer to delight in her self-fulfillment, by providing the fullest scope to her own creativity as well as to the tradition of the art.

When one dances the padam [the next item in a traditional performance],

one experiences the containment, cool and quiet of entering the sanctum from the external precincts. The expanse and brilliance of the outer corridors disappear in the dark inner sanctum; and the rhythmic virtuosities of the varṇam yield to the soulstirring music and abhinaya [expression] of the padam. Dancing to the padam is akin to the juncture when the cascading lights of worship are withdrawn and the drum beats die down to the simple and solemn chanting of sacred verses in the closeness of god. Then, the tillana [this is the pure abstract dance where the
sparkling footwork dominates] breaks into movement like the final burning of camphor accompanied by a measure of din and bustle.  

Pattabhi Raman 2001

By now, she says, the devotee internalizes the deity she has worshipped outside and completes the traditional order by dancing to a simple devotional verse (Pattabhi Raman 2001).

The dancer dances her worship in the temple, creates the temple within her body, and dances the temple in her performance. Further, dances teach one about the pantheon of gods in the Hindu traditions. To learn these dances is to know their physical appearances, their insignia, the colour of their clothes, and their demeanour. Many of the classical Indian dances depict the heroic deeds of these deities. For a child or teenager to learn classical Indian dances is to know stories of these deities that their parents are familiar with, the Hindu traditions that they grew up with in India or Trinidad or South Africa. Knowledge of Hinduism is not just of lofty philosophies for the large part; it is largely knowing stories from the epics Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata (c. 400 BCE–400 CE) and texts called Purāṇas (c. first millennium CE). Knowledge of these stories, along with local narratives, is known and transmitted in many communities, in most parts of India. While there are hundreds of stories and some are better known in certain areas, there is a certain corpus of tales that almost all Hindus in the diaspora have either heard or seen performed in their childhood. The dances also inform us about the social structures of the Hindu traditions. To learn dance is to enter the world of chaste wives, filial sons, committed students, chivalrous warriors, and righteous kings; it is to know the way in which the perfect couple, Rāma and Sītā related to each other; it is to know the filial piety of Gaṇeśa, the relationships between a human being and a personal deity. It is to know the received traditions of power structures; it is to know the relationships between kings and ministers, teachers, and students.

Some Hindus and scholars see this heritage as directly influencing Indian cinema today. Lutgendorf says that the cultural-historical approach of some scholars traces

the distinctive ‘Indianness’ of Indian popular cinema … to older styles of oral and theatrical performance, some of which survive into modern times …

On the one hand, one encounters grandiose claims that the classical tradition – and especially the two Sanskrit epics – constitute ‘the great code’ of popular filmmaking and that ‘any theoretical critique of Bombay Cinema must begin with a systematic analysis of the grand Indian metatext and “founder of (Indian) discursivity,” namely the … [Mahābhārata/Rāmāyaṇa] …’ (Mishra 1985:14). This is a claim that is sometimes made by filmmakers themselves, as when Mumbai director Dharmesh Darshan tells an interviewer, ‘In India, our stories depend on the Ramayan – all our stories are somewhere connected to this holy book’ (Kabir 2001: 93).

Lutgendorf 2008: 43

Although he acknowledges the overwhelming significance of the epics and the Purāṇas on modern cinema, Lutgendorf cautions against the essentialism and fastforwarding techniques this approach may involve. We cannot, he says hold that there is ‘an unchanging “essence” of Indian performance, or … imply that some genetic inheritance predisposes South Asians to relish three-hour spectacles of music, dance, and high emotion’ (Lutgendorf 2008: 43).

But cinema does not have to depend on Purānic or epic content for it to be religious. Plate argues that cinema is connected to religion and materiality in a number of ways. The material production of cinema and its very creation involves labour done by large contingents of
people who ‘aim to represent’ and ‘re-create’ a particular world and make it accessible to an audience, triggering mythological and symbolic dimensions across those worlds. Further, the act of watching itself is a ‘sensual experience done by actual bodies in actual space … an activity that becomes religious in its form’ (Plate forthcoming). One can add that the emotions experienced then would also be similar to notions of rasa discussed earlier in this chapter. Plate also shows how the material effects of cinema linger for a long time and people ‘religiously reproduce the world of the film’ in their lives. In short, as he elegantly says, ‘Cinema is a material media practice that is constantly embodied and re-embodied in and through bodies, time, and space’ (Plate forthcoming).

Cinema, like all performances, is dynamic and innovative. Each time a musician plays a rāga on the vīṇā – the very one that Sarasvatī holds in her hand – it sounds different. And while connections of modern performing arts with the natya śāstra, the epics, and the Purāṇas are abundantly evident, so too are the mutual exchanges and enrichments with other cultures; classical Carnatic music songs on Rāma have been composed in rāgas called Husseini and Paras (‘Persian’). Music, dance, and cinema are part of the larger cultural traditions marked by mutual transmission and transformation, whether it is India or Indonesia.

Worshipping Sarasvatī during the nine nights and ten days of the Navarātri festival

Music and dance are valorized and Sarasvatī is worshipped in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, South India, during the festival of Navarātri (‘nine nights; also known as dāsharā or ‘ten days’). Perhaps nowhere is ‘material’ culture as evident as it is during this festival. During these nine nights and ten days, women from some communities and castes in South India set up large tableaux of steps in their homes. These steps are covered with cloth, and populated with clay, papier-mâché, and wooden dolls, colourfully painted. On the ninth day (mahānavamī), a day which South Indians call ‘sarasvatīpūjā’, our goddess who graces Embassy Row, is venerated as the patron of music and learning.

Navarātri in certain communities in Tamilnadu and Karnataka is a domestic festival, primarily directed by women, and marked with a festival of dolls. A room is set apart and filled with exquisite dolls for the play of the goddesses Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, and Durgā. This display is called kolu, a Tamil word borrowed from the Telugu koluvu or ‘sitting in state’. This is a word used like darbār, or ‘holding court’, a term more recognizable in many parts of India. Women take leadership roles in worshipping the goddesses on these days. The tableaux they set up depict scenes from Hindu stories and are similar to the nativity scenes that one sees around Christmas. The focal point in the living or family room at home is the set of seven or nine tiers or steps filled with dolls, with prominence given to dolls representing the goddesses. Parks, schools, stores, and scenes from everyday life may also be arranged on the floor and, in recent years, themes that raise our consciousness of social issues are popular.

The tiered Navarātri steps may possibly simulate courtly darbār of King Krishna Deva Raya (reigned 1509–1529) of the Vijayanagara empire. Yet others would say that the steps denote the various parts of the universe, with animals, human beings, and celestial beings on the lower tiers and representations of the Supreme Being on the highest step, creating a pyramid of devotion. While there is no textual basis for this – or even for this specific celebration of Navarātri – like many Indian ideas, this rationale too takes a life of its own. Thus, it is a microcosm of the universe with the deity presiding on top. Others say that this is the time sacred for the goddess and that by arranging the dolls, the whole area becomes the play, the līlā, of the deities.
Historical narratives, including accounts by Western travellers during the time of the Vijayanagara empire in South India (c. fifteenth to sixteenth centuries CE), give us details of the celebrations in the royal courts. Foreign visitors report that during Navaratri, the king, in his capital city of Hampi, watched a royal procession from the Navaratri pavilion or maṇḍapam. The king and courtiers sat on various levels watching the festivities. The festival culminated in a grand celebration, with the king holding court. It is possible that this act of a royal court or (kolu or darbār) is what is re-created today in the domestic celebration of Navaratri kolu, with the tiered tableau of dolls representing the king and his courtiers.

The fluid and elastic boundaries between concepts of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’ that is characteristic of many perspectives in the Hindu traditions is particularly visible in the Navaratri festival. The entire kolu display is considered to be sacred even though ‘secular’ dolls may be set up on the tiers. For these nine days, the area is treated as the family shrine, and the dolls are considered to be consecrated. This sense of considering material images as alive and sacred is also seen in other parts of India; for instance, Hindus in the neighbourhoods and large family homes in West Bengal create large images of Durgā during this time and she is said to be infused with life for the few days of Navaratri. In West Bengal, Durgā is set up in the context of various backgrounds connected with popular culture. Scenes of Durgā against the Titanic or in Jurassic Park, or accompanied by Rambo, have been popular in the past; more recently, in 2007, attorneys representing J.K. Rowling sued a local neighbourhood in Kolkota for infringement of copyright when they re-created scenes from Harry Potter, complete with a replica of the Hogwarts school for wizards. (The Delhi High Court ruled in favour of the local neighbourhood and Harry Potter got to spend Navaratri with the goddess.)

As in Kolkota, since the second half of the twentieth century, the displays in the cities of Chennai (Madras) and Bangalore in India portray events of social importance, or even serve to be educational. Social themes have gained in prominence in post-colonial India and serve to raise people’s consciousness on issues such as India’s independence movement, organ donation and family planning. The displays are put up by the entire family, with women deciding the main themes. More recently, since the 1980s, free neighbourhood newspapers in Chennai, such as the Adyar Times and Mylapore Times have contests with visiting judges and sponsor prizes for the best displays.

Every evening during Navaratri, women and children in Tamil Nadu dressed in bright silks visit friends, admire the display of dolls, play musical instruments, and sing songs from the repertoire of classical music, usually in praise of one or another of the goddesses. Chickpeas and various other kinds of peas and beans, symbolic of fertility and prosperity are said to be sacred to the goddesses, and snacks made with these ingredients are frequently given in little packets to the visitors. It is a joyous time of festivity, music, elegance, and beauty, and the festival is a celebration of the embodiment of the divine in a ‘female’ form. The last two days of the festival are countrywide holidays in India and for people of South Indian origin, dedicated to the goddesses Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī. Large pictures of Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī, draped with garlands of fresh flowers, are kept in front of the display of dolls and worshipped.

Over and above these domestic and community celebrations, there is also a martial flavour to this festival. Some people believe that on the ninth day, Arjuna, one of the heroes of the epic Mahābhārata, found his weapons that he had hidden a year before. It is said that he paid respects to his weapons, acknowledging their importance, before he started battle with his cousins. Because of this story, in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, the last two days dedicated to Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī are called ayudhapūjā (‘veneration of weapons and machines’).
As a legacy of the Vijayanagara empire which covered parts of the modern state of Karnataka, we find some of the best-known and majestic Navarātri/Daśharā celebrations in this area. In the city of Mysore, the Maharāja would worship the goddess Cāmuṇḍī (a form of Durgā), ritually venerate the royal throne, weapons, and other symbols of royal power, as well as the multiple forms of the goddess Lakṣmī. On the tenth day, he would ride on a gold seat on top of the royal elephant in a long and colourful procession to the northeast boundary of the city. After ritually hunting animals and worshipping the śamī tree, the torch-lit procession came back to town for a royal darbār. Indeed, in an opulent display of military prowess, many kings and warriors in pre-colonial India frequently led ceremonial forays to the borders of their kingdoms and ritually crossed boundaries to simulate attacks against enemies – possibly a few miles away from the place where neighbouring monarchs were making those very ritual crossings into their own land.

In post-independent India, the grandeur and pageantry of the royal tournaments and processions associated with ayudhapūjā have been replaced with more pervasive community celebrations. On the ninth day, the day of sarasvatīpūjā, Sarasvatī is worshipped in domestic and public forums. In Tamil Nadu, the day is marked by keeping all the musical instruments in the house, some writing devices, selected textbooks, computers, and so on, in front of Sarasvatī, and the display of dolls, to be blessed by her for the rest of the year. Weapons, tools, vehicles, modes of transportation, including public buses and trains, cars and bikes, and in recent years, even sporting gear, are shown respect. These are decorated with garlands and coloured kumkum powder and dedicated to the goddesses with locally constructed neighbourhood rituals, generally without the assistance of Brahman ritual specialists or other priestly personnel. It is a time when one recognizes with respect what one owes to the tools of trade, recreation, and entertainment.

The last day, the ‘victorious tenth’ day of Navarātri (‘Vijayādaśamī’ or ‘Daśharā’ in South India; ‘Bijoya’ in Bengal), when kings formerly made their symbolic conquests of other land, is dedicated to Lakṣmī, the goddess of good fortune. People start new ventures, new account books, and learn new things on that auspicious day. Students in performing arts frequently meet and honour their traditional teachers – a practice very much encouraged among Hindus in the diaspora – and learn new pieces of music or the first steps of a new dance, and acquire new knowledge. On the last days of the Navarātri festival, the fortune of learning, the wealth of wisdom, and the joy of music are said to be given by the grace of the goddesses.

The ‘rosary’, the swan, and the lotus

The rituals connected with sarasvatīpūjā explicitly articulate the respect shown to learning and performing arts and we noted that books, laptops, musical instruments, all that have a network of affordances connected with knowledge, and with continuing culture and tradition, are revered this day. But the Embassy Row Sarasvatī also comes with other symbols; she carries the ‘akṣamālā /rosary/tasbīh beads’, stands on a lotus, and is accompanied by a swan. The beads are said, according to the sign below, to symbolize ‘unlimited knowledge’; the swan is said to indicate ‘wisdom’. Even this brief blurb below the statue seems to make a distinction between the ‘knowledge’ symbolized by the book on the one hand, and the ‘unlimited knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ symbolized by the rosary and the swan, on the other. This distinction is inherent in some dominant strands of thought in the Hindu tradition, starting with the Upaniṣads. The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad states that there are two levels of knowledge:
Two types of knowledge a man should learn … the higher and the lower. The lower of
the two consists of the Ṛgveda, the Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, the Atharvaveda, phonetics,
the ritual science, grammar, etymology, metrics, and astronomy; whereas the higher
is the one by which one grasps the imperishable.

Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 4–5; Olivelle 1996: 268

It is striking that the Upaniṣads, which the Hindus consider to be the last part of the Vedas,
place themselves – and the specific, named Vedas in the category of ‘lower’ knowledge –
that is, part of learned, cognitive knowledge, whereas the higher knowledge is said to be the
experiential wisdom, the experience of brahman itself. The higher knowledge cannot be grasped
by words or the mind, and cannot be expressed. The manuscript points one in the direction
of knowledge learned from books; on the other hand, the beads, which one uses for countless
repetition of mantras or divine names, is seen here as symbolic of the higher knowledge.
The swan (technically, goose), in popular culture, is indicative of the soul’s connection with
brahman, and also said to be symbolic of a soul which is only focused on getting the knowledge
through which it gets the higher liberating wisdom. In much of Sanskrit literature, the haṃsā
is said to have discerning wisdom, separating ‘milk from water’; and the Indian way of saying
that it separates what is real from what is irrelevant, like separating the wheat from the chaff
(Vogel 1962:7).

The Embassy Row Sarasvatī, therefore, provides us with a way of understanding the
significance of material culture in contemporary Hinduism in India, and even Indonesia. But
the location of this goddess is outside the Indonesian embassy which represents a country
where less than 3 per cent of the population is Hindu. India, in line with its identity of being
a sovereign, socialist, secular democratic republic (as stated in the preamble to the Indian
constitution), is generally very careful about officially having religious symbols on public view.
The Indonesian embassy, on the other hand, makes a political statement by having a Hindu
goddess in its premises. Linda Wertheimer, the host of the NPR talk show introduced at the
beginning of this chapter, asked Indonesian Ambassador Dino Djalal about the reasons for
having Sarasvatī. ‘Indonesia is home to the largest population of Muslims in the world’, she
asked the ambassador; ‘Why did you decide on a Hindu goddess?’ Wertheimer noted in the
broadcast that ‘[O]f all the statues on Massachusetts Avenue, that all of the embassies have put
in front of their embassy, most of them are elderly gentleman with beards’. Ambassador Djalal,
laughed, said that was a million dollar question and said:

One of the most famous – if not the most famous – islands in Indonesia is Bali. And
Bali is a Hindu enclave in Muslim-majority Indonesia. And I think it says a lot about
our respect for religious freedom that the statue in front of the country with the
largest Muslim population is a Hindu statue. And, you know, we feel good about it.7

To have Sarasvatī, a Hindu goddess here, in front of the embassy whose country has the
largest Muslim population in the world, is clearly not just a whimsical or aesthetic statement;
it is a political one, just as it is to have gigantic Hanumāns, Buddhas, and Jain teachers in other
parts of Asia.

Concluding material

Goddesses like Lakṣmī are addressed as prakṛti – the original nature or substance – and as
vikṛti, the modified and evolved state of prakṛti, from which the material world arises and
which is in essence non-different from *prakṛti* (see Jacobsen 1999: 49–52). So too, as we have discussed, materialities and meanings are essentialized and evolve. Matter, in Hindu schools of thought and practice, as we have been discussing in this chapter, is heterogeneous. There are different kinds of ‘matter-s’ and different meanings attached to them. Meanings may be simultaneous and successive, or at any given time people may hold only one as important. Paper, however late its entrance into Indian culture, and however lowly, still has the potential to teach; and should not be shown disrespect. Matter, paradoxically is fluid; sometimes concrete, sometimes hyper-material, a tall statue may be a symbol of political clout, cultural capital, a deity who grants desires, a manifestation of ultimate reality, and move between the states. The significance of the materialities arises in part from their afforances to give, on the one hand, learning, happiness, and prosperity on this earth, and on the other, detachment and liberation from the cycle of life and death. It is through multiple matters that reality is continually created, manifested, and re-created; our bodies are matter and we think with physical brains composed of material grey cells. However, our bodies that are matter are also pervaded, at least in the material eyes of some Hindu schools, with souls. And both the non-conscious matter and souls are pervaded, as we saw, by *brahman*, or a super-soul and form its body; so that which has ‘consciousness’ or ‘spirit’ is also heterogeneous.

Despite her very material body and material accessories, despite her political and aesthetic presence, the explanatory statements about Sarasvatī (which are congruent with interpretations of the attributes given in oral traditions and popular culture) push one to explore the connections between materiality, consciousness, and deities with and without form. Her attributes suggest networks of afforances connected with materiality and performativity; and paths to liberation through them and transcending them. Like the embassy which is the piece of sovereign territory, a tangible presence of the country it represents, the goddess on Embassy Row is also – depending on one’s perspective – fully divine or fully material, and as some could hold philosophically, a presence on earth as she is in heaven.

Notes

1 Transcribed from photographs of the statue and sign kindly supplied by Vasu Mohan, Washington DC, 24 May and 10 June 2014.

2 For instance, see the top three amongst the tallest statues in ‘7 Largest Statues in the World’ at http://www.touropia.com/largest-statues-in-the-world/, accessed 30 May 2014


   Of the top ten statues under eighty feet in height, five are of the divine-monkey deity, Hanumān; see ‘Top Ten Large Statues of India Below 80 Feet’, http://www.walkthroughindia.com/walkthroughs/top-ten-large-statues-of-india-below-80-feet/, accessed 5 June 2014.


6 The *haṃsā* is literally a goose but frequently translated as ‘swan’.


8 The *Lakṣmī Aṣṭotram* is a prayer popular in Tamil Nadu in both domestic and temple spaces, and is used in ritual worship in Śrī Vañşāva temples. It is of unknown date and origin which records one hundred and eight names of the goddess Lakṣmī. It was probably canonical by the thirteenth century at least because Vedānta Deśīka alludes to it. In this prayer, Lakṣmī is addressed as *prakṛti* and as *vikṛti*. Although this prayer is transmitted and learned by way of oral tradition, it is now printed in prayer manuals and also available in the internet.
Bibliography


Vaiṣṇavī Purāṇa, see H. H. Wilson.
