

Article

Hindu Deities in the Flesh: “Hot” Emotions, Sensual Interactions, and (Syn)aesthetic Blends

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Abstract: In Hindu practices and narratives, otherworldly and nonhuman beings appear with nonhuman and otherworldly bodies and feelings. In this article, I draw from ethnographic fieldwork as well as from philology to outline the widespread perception of divine presence or emotion as “heat”. This embodied idea or multi-sensual “aesthetic blend”, as I propose to call it, can be found in very diverse cultural and historical traditions of South Asia. It is more than a concept, a “mapping” or a metaphor, insofar as it informs how people not only think of, but sensually encounter the bodies of goddesses and gods. By adding this new term to the vocabulary of the Study of Religions, I intend to build upon the focus on embodied, enacted and situated religion, as it has become prominent within the discipline, to see the seemingly disembodied texts and stories in a new light. Does, in the end, the way divine bodies are imagined feed back into how humans conceptualize and feel their own bodies?

Keywords: embodiment; Hindu mythology; *bhakti*; emotion; aesthetics of religion; synesthesia; cognitive blending; conceptual metaphor



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1. Introduction

*Pratighāt kī jvalā jāle,
Pratiśodh jāb lene cale,
Saṅghāvanī Jagdāmbikā,
Nārī bane jāb Cāṇḍikā.*

A fire of revenge burns
When she goes out to strike back,
When a woman becomes Cāṇḍikā,
The Mother of the World.

As the theme song of the 1994 movie *Anjaam* (directed by Rahul Rawail) has it, any woman can turn into Cāṇḍikā when she has got too much and seethes with anger. Cāṇḍikā is, like Cāmuṇḍā and Kālī, a name of the bloodthirsty face of Devī, “the Goddess” in general. These four short lines are enough to identify one specific goddess with the Goddess as such, the “Mother of the World” (Sk. *Jagat-Āmbika*), this divine being with a human woman, and the emotion of anger with the sensual quality of heat. In this article, I track the blending of divine presence, anger, or energy with “heat” through various ethnographic and philological accounts on Hindu deities and their bodies, their embodiment and corporeality. This specific identification shall, in turn, serve to tentatively define a phenomenon I propose to call “aesthetic blending”, modeled after what is known in the cognitive sciences as “conceptual blending” or “mapping” (Lakoff 2008, pp. 22–23). In contrast to the later terms, however, I aim to shift the focus away from processes of data processing to human experience and to sensual and emotional aspects of human-divine interactions. This might help to avoid the danger to reduce the mind to the brain, and to explain away local lifeworlds and deities and feelings in favor of cognitive universals (Franke 2014). Months

of fieldwork on the central Himalayan goddess Nainī Mātā strengthened my conviction that her religion is based less on propositions and cognitions than on emotional and sensual relations and practices, the bulk of which remains nonverbal and implicit. I find this insight helpful and inspiring also for the historical study of Hindu religion, even though it is much harder to find evidence for nonverbal and implicit feelings and relations in, for instance, a Sanskrit text. In philological approaches to Old Indian religion, a proposition such as that “religion feels before it thinks” (Schaefer 2015, p. 8) might remain a belief, which we will never be able to ground on compelling evidence. In this article, however, I outline one motive which reappears throughout Hindu contexts and which may help us to have a more profound idea of how it felt to interact with deities and to blend with them, in ancient as well as in present times: divine anger, as well as love for a god, feels “hot”.

The first part of the article unfolds the well-established finding that Hindu worship is often aiming at emotional encounter or even identification with specific deities. This part forms the background to study religious storytelling as a part of religious practices—one way to embody and feel religion. A complementary task, then, is to look within the stories for what they tell about bodies and feelings. To do that, parts 3–6 sum up examples from various cultural contexts to demonstrate that heat continues to be a central form or medium in which deities and their emotions take shape. Part 7 gives a brief introduction into two Sanskrit terms, *guṇa* and *rasa*, which appear in various stages of South Asian religion, philosophy and aesthetic theory as categories of emotional, sensual and bodily qualities. Especially the concept of *rasa* demonstrates a high tendency to blend various senses to speak of emotional moods as something “tasted” as well as “seen” and “felt”, which leads into a theoretical discussion of synaesthesia, conceptual metaphor and aesthetic blending in part 8. The manifestations of divine presence and emotions as “heat” can be seen as a conceptual metaphor, drawing from a general human tendency to conceive of anger or emotional intensity as heat (cf. Kövecses 2000, 2008). However, I try to go beyond an understanding of metaphors as mere mental or cognitive “mappings”, of blending different mental spheres with each other.¹ Instead, I search for emotional and sensual aspects of blends, such as the identification of “hot” chili, hot bodily temperature, “hot” diseases like fever and “heated” passions of gods and humans. By calling it “aesthetic” and not “sensual” or “perceptual”, I mean to indicate that such a blending is informed by cultural and religious traditions, while it may still be based on near-universal bodily experience (Johnson and Lakoff 1999). Aesthetic blending is close to the phenomenon of synaesthesia, but less in the sense of a neurological condition one “has” or has not (Simner 2019, p. 2) than in the sense of an active and creative world-making.

In the Study of Religions, a focus on embodied, enacted and situated religion has become prominent, seeking to overcome text- or logocentric approaches to religion. Projects such as the Aesthetics of Religion and Material Religion have not only shed more light on the nonverbal aspects of religion, but also helped to see the religious imaginations and stories themselves in a new light: How are the stories performed and depicted? How do mythological characters, more than abstract creators of worlds, become a part of the actual lifeworld of people?

2. Hindu Religion as an Interacting and/or Blending with Divine Bodies

Hindu goddesses and gods take bodies to sensually interact with humans in acts of worship. Alternatively or additionally, they embody themselves within human bodies in states of possession, on theatre stages or movie screens. Such religious practices are rooted in a long history of imagining divine bodies and emotions as different from, but closely related to human bodies and feelings. Deities embodied in figures and temple images are usually considered as perceiving beings, who taste the food offerings, smell the incense and hear the mantras, bells and songs which mark a situation of Hindu worship as religious (cf. Colas 2014). As this is the background for my argument about heat as a form of divine embodiment and emotion, let me first unroll my understanding of the embodiment of

deities in ritual situations, myths and metaphors as a blending of identities and of sensual perceptions. Not only in Hindu traditions, this is a main aspect of religious imagination.²

In their various worlds (Sanskrit *loka*), Hindu deities appear in various shapes and bodies. They are often imagined and ritually encountered in shifting shapes and changing avatars when they incarnate in our human world, the “world of mortals” (Sk. *Mṛtyuloka*). The Sanskrit verb for “crossing over” (*ava-tr*) from their own worlds into this one is also used in modern Hindi for deities “taking a shape” (Hi. *avatār lenā*), incarnating—often in human flesh, in states of possession. The most well-known classical divine *avatārs* are the ten or more mythological bodies taken by the prominent god Viṣṇu—some of them human, some of them animal-like, and others mixed. In the Indian Himalaya, *avatār lenā* is what deities (*devtā*) or ghosts (*bhūt*) do when they take possession of human bodies, acting and speaking through them (Jassal 2017; Sax 2009a). While the Sanskrit word *avatāra* has taken a quite different and specific meaning in a current cultural context, it also retains some aspects of the old meaning, even its origin in a verb for “crossing over”. Both in the old stories and the current performances of “divine embodiment or ‘spirit possession’” (Jassal 2016, p. 1), deities cross over from one world to another, shifting shape and temporally taking bodies.

Often, one goddess or god can have more than one body at once: The goddess Durgā, for instance, can be present in the statues (*mūrti*) of all her temples at once. In a way, she is “more” embodied or present in a *mūrti* which has been activated in ritual acts such as the “installation of breath” (Sk. *prāṇa-pratiṣṭha*) than in an unactivated figure, a poster or on a TV screen, which are nevertheless not devoid of divine presence and can be worshipped (Lutgendorf 2008, p. 46f.). The presence of deities is usually considered even higher in “natural” (*prakṛtirūpa*) than in “figurine” (*mūrtirūpa*) forms or bodies of gods (Haberman 2017, p. 484). A similar distinction between “self-emergent” (*svayambhū*) forms, such as stones, rivers or trees, and those man-made and ritually “installed” (*pratiṣṭhit*) was even quoted at the High Court of Uttarakhand in a judgement which declared the rivers Gaṅgā and Yamunā to be “juristic/legal persons/living entities” (ELAW 2017). A religious understanding of divine embodiment, a juridical understanding of corporate or legal personhood and a biological understanding of a living body were, in this manner, conceptually blended. As I will argue throughout this article, conceptual or cognitive blends are rooted in sensual and embodied processes of blending. This allows me to speak about religious, mythical or ritual worlds as “imaginative”, “virtual” or “enhanced” realities, without implying that these realities are right or wrong (cf. Johannsen and Kirsch 2020; Traut and Wahl 2020). Rituals draw from human bodily experience and from imaginations rooted in bodily experience—but, at the same time, create the bodies they depend on:

A rite without a body must, by eulogy or gesture or metonymic association, create a type of body that can be mourned, fondled by grief, and then laid very clearly to rest. (Bell 2006, p. 542f.)

During my ethnographic fieldwork on the serpent- and human-shaped Nāginā or Naiṇī goddesses of Pindar valley in Garhwal, a Himalayan region in Northwest India, these goddesses took several bodies to appear among humans (Lange 2019a). Those bodies were made of bamboo, of *babulū* grass, or—for short moments—of the living bodies of humans in states of possession, or of actors on stages. Both possessed and theatrical bodies were called “dancing” (*nācnevāle*) or “danced”: for making a divine being dance, Hindi has a transitive word, *nacānā*, for “dancing” someone (see Sax 2002). It was not always clear whether it was a human actor who made the goddess, other gods or ghosts dance, or whether the human body was her- or himself danced by someone else. In any way, the nonhuman deities or not-any-more human ghosts “came over them” (*upar āye*) to be together with the living, to cry with them, to be touched or hugged by them.

Humans worship deities because they regard them as powerful, capable to benefit as well as to harm them. Nevertheless, my fieldwork has taught me that worship (*pūjā*) is also an end in itself. Embodied deities are “handled like persons to whom the worshipper has a special emotional relationship, i.e., like a family member whom he or she loves and cares for” (Luchesi 2020, p. 207). Consequently, “the gods are thought to be present only as

long as they are invoked, that is, actually worshipped and ritually treated” (ibid., p. 211). Afterwards, it is unproblematic to get rid of such an ephemeral or temporary body, even though the “disposal” (*visarjan*) of a *mūrti* is as much clothed in ritual acts as its animation, the installation of breath, had been before. In 2011, the Naiṇī goddess of Ratuṛa village, who had been embodied in a bamboo pole for half a year, took on another body: a rope, several kilometers long, made of *babulū* grass.³ After 9 days of weaving this rope, it was piled up into nine heaps—representing the nine Naiṇīs, the serpent sisters of Pindar valley (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A rope made of *babulū* grass, arranged into nine heaps, represents the nine Naiṇīs, the serpent sisters of Pindar valley (image by the author, March 2011).

The rope unfolded when a huge crowd of people dispersed to take the two ends of the rope and ran uphill and downhill, mimicking a serpent’s movement. After all, for them it was indeed a serpent, whose tail moved downhill and whose head, attached to the bamboo pole, moved uphill (Figure 2a). When it was completely uncoiled, a trumpet blow signaled that the Goddess had left this earthly body in the “world of mortals” (Hi. *mṛtyulok*) and returned home, to the “world of serpents” (*nāglok*). At once, people started chopping the rope into pieces, which they then took home as *prasād*, the embodied “blessing” of the Goddess (Figure 2b). This apparently violent act is an expression of the wish to keep with them some part (*aṃś*) of the goddess’s body—of her embodied power, love and protection.



(a)

(b)

Figure 2. The Naiñi goddess of the village Rains runs downhill in the twofold-body of a bamboo pole and the rope made of *babulū* grass (a). The rope body is then cut into pieces and taken home as *prasād*, the Goddess's embodied blessing (b). I can use these images with the friendly permission of Kapil Negi, who took these images and shared them on Facebook under the title *mata ka prasad Seera le jate Bhaktjan*, “the devotees take the rope as Mother's *prasād*”.

While it is not unproblematic to use “Hinduism” as an umbrella term for so many diverse cultural and religious traditions (Sharma 2002), Hindus all over South Asia share terms related to those mentioned so far, which stem from the Sanskrit terms *devatā*, *bhūta*, *pūjā*, *prāṇa*, *prasāda*, *mūrti*, *visarjana*, and *aṃśa*. Their cognates are also used by those who speak languages which are not derived from Sanskrit. Across languages, similar sets of tender gestures, ritual acts of “service” or “approach” (Sk. *upacāra*) are “to be performed regularly in a temple *pūjā* (worship). *Vastra* (clothing), *puṣpa* (the draping with flower garlands), and *gandha* (the application of ointments) are imperative *upācaras* (attendances)” (Luchesi 2011, p. 191). Across South Asia, it is possible to speak not only about specific statues of Durgā, but also about the “statue of a Durgā” (ibid., p. 193), of one specific Durgā, who may have a different personality from the Durgā of the next village. Were “Hinduism” defined by specific forms of relation and sensual interaction between human and divine beings, entailing the above or related concepts, this would bring together many various cultural traditions commonly labeled Hindu—and, perhaps, even those that decidedly reject these forms of embodiment, favoring a relation to a deity which is “disembodied” (Sk. *arūpa*), “formless” (*nirguṇa*) or “unworldly” (*alaukika*). In that, these movements as well draw from the Hindu vocabulary of embodiment.

The embodiment and presence of deities makes them addressable, enabling the practice of worship (*pūjā*), and the sensual relation and emotional resonance between deities

and humans. Embodied in mount Govardhan, God Kṛṣṇa is more approachable than in his heavenly realm, the “world of Cows” (*Goloka*); on an emotional level, he is still more approachable as a little stone in a house shrine. As David Haberman was told by a woman living close to Govardhan, she preferred worshipping a stone from the mountain rather than the mountain itself:

I can do *sevā* (performance of loving acts) to this one stone much more easily than [towards] the whole mountain. I can bathe it with milk and water, I can massage its body with scented oils, I can dress it with fine clothes, I can feed it tasty sweets, and I can even put it to bed at night. I can't do that to the whole mountain. (Haberman 2017, p. 489)

Devotion (*bhakti*) towards Kṛṣṇa can unfold in many ways, and has produced a rich terminology for religious or spiritual emotions, which are always deeply embodied (see Raghavan [1940] 1976, p. 143 ff.). Bathing, massaging, dressing, feeding and putting to bed a stone, alias Kṛṣṇa, enacts and embodies a “motherly tenderness” (*vātsalya rati*) directed towards the god imagined as a child (Pasche Guignard 2016). This form of love is distinguished from the “erotic” or “sweet love” (*mādhurya rati*) embodied by male and female worshippers who do not imagine themselves as mothers, but as Kṛṣṇa's female lovers, the famous Gopīs or “cowgirls” with whom he spent his Youth in the Braj region (Lange 2017).

Apart from the different ways to sensually interact with and to tenderly approach deities, another possibility is to blend one's own identity with that of a deity. In possession rituals and ritual theatre, both happens at once: Some participants experience themselves as becoming a deity, others approach and worship her, or even argue with her in a kind of “divine politicking” (Jassal 2016). On the microlevel of worshipping Kṛṣṇa in Govardhan stones, and Śiva in Aruṇācala stones, Haberman identifies different general tendencies of the two gods either towards interacting or towards blending with their worshippers: While Kṛṣṇa tends to be loved as a child or lover, whose devotees “endorse *bhāva* or emotional engagement”, Śiva is worshipped as the “powerful Lord and Great Yogī . . . nondifferent from one's own self” (Haberman 2017, p. 498). While “the religion associated with Mount Govardhan aims for a loving and joyful relationship with Kṛṣṇa,” Śaivism—the religion of Śiva—“tends to strive for *mokṣa* or ‘liberation,’ understood as either complete identification with Śiva or the achievement of a similar form” (ibid.). These tendencies are not universal, but can be traced back far into the history of religion and resonate well with what people in Garhwal told me about Śiva and Kṛṣṇa. They are, however, not universal: In the Kṛṣṇa-centered temple of Sem Mukhem, also in Garhwal, the serpent king (*Nāgarāj*) Kāliya is worshipped as a form or aspect of Kṛṣṇa—even though, in the story, Kāliya, after attacking Kṛṣṇa, becomes his servant and devotee.⁴ In local stories of Garhwal, as well as in the Sanskrit *Purāṇa* texts known all over South Asia, deities worship each other all the time. Therefore, from a human point of view, blending with one goddess in a possession state does not exclude interacting with and worshipping another.

Humans blend with deities not only cognitively, but also emotionally and aesthetically, on the level of sensual perception. Rather than *thinking* of themselves as divine, they *feel* deities acting and speaking through them. In Garhwal, deities possessing humans are framed in terms of “taking an *avatar*”, or of “riding” a human as their horse (*daṅgariyā*) or animal (*pasva*; cf. Jassal 2017, p. 146). This hints at the complicated relationships of Hindu deities to their animal vehicles (Sk. *vāhanas*), who are both the carriers and servants of the gods and an additional embodiment of their specific personality traits: the warlike and fierce goddess Durgā rides a lion and is like a lion in character, while Viṣṇu is served and carried by the glorious, immensely strong and shining eagle or bird-man Garuḍa, son of the sky goddess Vinatā. Viṣṇu also has a second *vāhana* who serves him not as a vehicle, but as a bed to sleep and dream upon: the infinite, immortal and ascetic serpent Ananta, the “endless one” (see Lange 2019a). The chain of multiplication and identification of divine bodies gets more complicated when Viṣṇu's avatar Kṛṣṇa dances on the serpent Kāliya. This mythical dance is, in a way, reenacted in *jāgars*, possession rituals of Garhwal:

In *jagar*, the medium or devotee lends their body to the god, enabling the god to ‘dance’. The devotee thus ‘physically carries, and is carried away, by the god [. . .]. In *jagar* narratives, the devotee Kaliya Nag also becomes a vehicle for dance [. . .]. The devotee Kaliya, conjoined with the god in dance, carries the god from the darkness of the serpent’s world to the place of humans. In this way, the god is re-awakened—made *jāgrit*—to himself and his devotees in the world, which is also the aim of *jagar* as mode of ‘awakening’ god. (Jassal 2020, p. 115)

To frame possession, in this way, as “divine dance” (*devnāc*) is a third alternative prevalent in Garhwal, besides deities taking an *avatar* or riding a vehicle. All these concepts, in a way, blur the meta-distinction between the distinctness or the identity of humans with their gods. In the folk theatre of Garhwal, playing a god or goddess on a stage often results in divine possession. Generally, South Asian traditions do often not clearly distinguish ritually enacting and theatrically playing gods from possession (Sax 2009b).

When a god temporarily takes the shape of the of a human being, or a human temporarily becomes one with a goddess, such a merging of human and divine bodies points out a human possibility to transcend one’s own bodily limitations by imagining oneself in a divine body. As stories about Hindu goddesses and gods have always been embedded in religious practice, ethnographic accounts of how humans experience and imagine their own bodies as transformed should be kept in mind while analysing classical myths. Throughout Hindu mythologies, divine bodies are described as different from human bodies. Among all the gods and goddesses of South Asia, there are few, if any, stories about deities being born in the “ordinary” way in which humans are conceived and carried out (Lange 2020). Divine bodies also tend to be multiple: South Indian *nāga* goddesses can, at the same place and at once, turn into a snake, a termite hill and a human woman (Alloco 2013, p. 220, fn. 4). Their Tibetan pendant, the *klu*, simultaneously “dwell in the underworld and embody water sources, stones and trees” (Vargas-O’Byran 2013, p. 103).

Imagining or performing the body of a god is not “mere” imagination or “just making things up”, but takes place somewhere between presence and representation. If non-religious theatre acting, to some extent, brings the role which is played “to life”, then how much more transformative is possession by a god or goddess! As elsewhere, Indian Himalayan deities incarnate in human bodies identify themselves by displaying specific signature moves, such as Kālī’s stuck-out tongue or Kachiya-Bhairav’s claw-like hand gesture. Such signs are symbols rather in a presentative than in a representational sense, as they transport their meaning in a nonverbal and affective, albeit still conventionalized manner: it is a “hermeneutics of the body”, a “matter of embodiment, not of language” (Sax 2009a, p. 183). Sax’s forthcoming book, *In the Valley of the Kauravas*, abounds with examples of inhabitants of the remote Tons river valley who, by means of storytelling, blend their own lifestories with those of their grandparents and those of mythical ancestors in a more distant past, which, in turn, form a local version of the Pan-South-Asian *Mahābhārata* epic.

Long story short: The embodiedness, the corporeality of Hindu gods is obvious, in the sensual interactions with human people as well as in the stories about the goddesses and gods being born, breastfed (Lange 2019b), fighting, bleeding, crying, having sex, and so on. These themes potentially bring together most of the culturally, temporally and linguistically widely disparate traditions called “Hinduism”, but do not necessarily distinguish these traditions from other religions. By giving this article the title “Hindu deities in the flesh”, I intend to evoke more specific links and associations, some of which I elaborate in this article:

- Deities enter human flesh in possession states and ritual theatre when they incarnate in humans, “taking *avatar*” for some minutes.
- A special form of “incarnating” is possession by a disease goddess, i.e., the disease itself: cholera or smallpox, aids or corona.

- Divine bodies themselves are extraordinary. However, like human bodies, they are conceived as passionate, psychosomatic wholes whose temperature and temperament can be “heated” or cooled.
- As some examples from 16th ct. *bhakti* poetry demonstrate, the religious love for Gods like Kṛṣṇa is experienced on a very bodily level. In the songs of Mīrā Bāi and Sūr Dās, even the heat of love for Krishna appears as a form of the god himself.
- My title also hints at the title *Philosophy in the Flesh* by Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, whose theory of conceptual metaphors can be helpful to understand Hindu concepts of divine presence.

Two conceptual metaphors—which are much more than metaphors—lie at the core of any Hindu-religious act. One “root metaphor of Hindu religious experience” (Erndl 1993, p. 101) is the “awakening” (Hi. *jāgrt karnā*) of divine presence in a *murtī* or a possessed human body. Awakening this presence means to increase the divine power or energy (*śakti*) in this body, which can be dealt with in terms of heat. Arguably, the temperature of divine and human bodies can also be considered a core metaphor for divine presence and *śakti*. A missionary among Gond people in Madhya Pradesh, for instance, was only allowed to purchase a figure of god Kṛṣṇa one day after the deity had become “cold” (Hi. *ṭhaṇḍā*)—meaning that a “priest had deconsecrated all the statues as of no further religious value” (Kraatz 1997, p. 167).

The presence of a goddess or god turns a material object into her or his body. When a human body is turned, by this heat or energy, into a divine body, this is potentially blissful, but can also be very dangerous. There are goddesses so “hot” that people prefer them not to enter their body, because they manifest or incarnate in diseases such as fever, smallpox or cholera.

3. Hot and Cold Divine Bodies: Ethno-Medical Accounts

In the case of goddesses who are diseases, such as the smallpox goddess Śītalā and the cholera Goddess Hulkā Devī, their “hot” temperament completely blends with the “heat” of the disease. When, recently, at several places in India there appeared the need to also worship a Corona Goddess, it became apparent that she is like other disease goddesses in that she “needs to be placated before she agrees to spare the people by cooling off and becoming benign” (Sen 2020, cf. Samanta 2020). Disease goddesses usually operate on local levels and, in their myths, emerge from human family dramas as mistreated, outcast or killed women (see Pandey and Heidmarie 2002, pp. 1–6). Sometimes they are disease, sometimes they afflict with disease, and sometimes they ward off diseases. Śītalā’s name even means “the cooling one”, highlighting her positive side as the one who brings relief from smallpox when she is herself appeased (Kinsley 1987, p. 211).

To relieve the “heat” of disease, usually “cold” substances such as water or milk are used. I put “hot” and “cool” in quotation marks, because they are, to some extent, metaphorical and metaphysical rather than referring to physical, bodily sensations. How metaphorical they are, depends on the context: In traditional South Asian medicine as well as religious practice, even warm milk is regarded as “cooling down” heated states of bodies, psyches, and deities. In German, this would be a metaphorical statement, while English enables us to take it more literally, as the word “hot” does not only refer to sensations of temperature, but also of spicy food. If my mouth is burning from hot chili, I can literally “cool” it down with warm milk. While Hindu rituals work to “cool down” a fever or appease a hot goddess, no one in South Asia would try to use warm milk to prevent a snowman from melting.

In the Tamil-speaking parts of South India, the goddess Mariamman is at once “perceived as the source of poxes, as the one who heals poxes, while she is considered poxes as such” (Srinivasan 2019, p. 2). In a variety of religious and poetic Tamil texts, from recent songs back to anthologies from the first centuries C.E., Perundevi Srinivasan finds complex associations between “a pox-afflicted body and a cultivated agricultural field” (ibid., p. 10), between poxes, grains and raindrops, and between the “pus or putrid matter oozing from

the lesion" and "mother's milk" (ibid., p. 3). Several objects in the world are linked, partly by similarities in the way they look, feel or smell, partly by reference to abstract concepts such as fertility, generosity and health: Here, it is barely possible to neatly distinguish between "metaphors, metonymies and imagistic correlations" (ibid., p. 13). Such cognitive blends can enhance and enrich the world people experience and live in, but only due to "creative and aesthetic investment". Only when the said poetic associations are embodied and enacted in religious practices,

the goddess is 'actualized' as the body of the afflicted person and as an autonomous force [. . .]. The mutual correlations of a pox-afflicted body and a cultivated agricultural field formulate an ontological realm, which contributes to the forging of the 'presence' of the divine. (ibid., pp. 3, 10)

"Possession" is, in her view, a misleading term for what is happening or experienced here, as it portrays the body as a "template" or "substrate", merely carrying or containing a psyche, self, or deity. This objectifying way to talk about the body is, however, not quite absent from how people in Garhwal understand rituals carried out to "make a god wear a body" (*devtā ko śarīr dhārit karnā*), i.e., incarnate in humans:

The body 'as place' [*sthān*] is a special site of presence because it is a 'vehicle' (*vāhan*) that carries the god to more stable or permanent places of dwelling, such as temples. (Jassal 2020, pp. 107, 116)

Even people who identify poxes with a goddess's "grace and affection" do not particularly desire to become her vehicle, as it hurts unbearably and can lead to death (Srinivasan 2019, p. 4). This is as true in North India, where another pox goddess, Śitalā, "the cooling one", is as much identified with healing as with the disease itself. This is at least the traditional way to interpret the goddess, whereas Fabrizio Ferrari argues that "the label 'disease/smallpox goddess' is one resulting from colonial readings" (Ferrari 2013, p. 246). Instead of taking her name as an euphemism, scholars should take her name seriously, the "cooling one" or "she who is cold". The illness is not the body of the Goddess, blending with the body of the patient, but rather identified with her ass, whom she rides and tames:

Śitalā is not disease per se. Rather she is an *adhiṣṭātrī*, a controller. By riding—that is, controlling—the ass, Śitalā shows her cooling power over dreadful occurrences (from droughts to infertility and diseases) popular interpreted as an unnatural state of hotness. (Ferrari 2013, p. 249)

This "radically new" interpretation (ibid.) suggests that it is the ass and not the goddess who represents the disease. The identification of the ass with the disease is plausible for a number of reasons, grounded in empirical observations as well as in the traditional attribution of character traits to the animal.⁵ Most importantly, the Sanskrit language itself permeates the identity of donkeys with pox, as it has a word for both, *gardhabhaka*, "anybody or anything resembling an ass" but also "a cutaneous disease (eruption of round, red, and painful spots)."

The *vāhanas*, however, the animals which carry the gods throughout South Asian iconography, are embodied aspects as much as servants of the gods they carry. When Kṛṣṇa, for instance, subdues Kāliya, the venomous serpent becomes not only his servant, but also an embodiment of a "darker" character trait of Kṛṣṇa himself (Jassal 2020). Like cool Śitalā's hot donkey, sweet⁶ Kṛṣṇa's poisonous snake aspect is a part or potential within his person. While criticizing the short-sighted notion that Śitalā in northern and Mariamman in southern India are the disease themselves, both Srinivasan and Ferrari point out that the disease⁷ or the Goddess⁸ are conceived as a latent potential within the human body itself. Therefore, I would like to suggest a synthesis between the "colonial" and the "radically new" readings of the relation between the "cool" goddess and the "hot" disease, embodied in her animal companion. The disease has to be seen as part of the goddess herself, as it is known in Bengali as "*icchā vasantā* (Spring's will), *māyer dayā* (the mother's grace), *māyer khelā* (the mother's play) and *devir cumu* (the kiss of the goddess)" (Ferrari 2010, p. 153). In that way, it makes sense to say that the goddess is indeed the disease, as

much as, in Garhwal, goddess Kālī appears as “jaundice, bile, sore throat, measles, fatal snakebite, and whooping cough” (Sax 2002, p. 137). Of course, the people suffering from these diseases do not welcome these incarnations with open arms, even though they are divine embodiments “in the flesh”, in the most literal sense. I do not want to perpetuate the clichéd notion that Hindus gleefully accept death as a part of life, or pain as a part of birth. Still, the Goddesses personifying death, pain and disease are treated as goddesses rather than demonesses, and their treatment aims at pacifying rather than expelling them. In the person of a disease goddess, the ailment and the cause of disease become identical. Healing snakebites with a serum, made of the same venom that is causing the sickness, is the most obvious real example of such a relation; and the serpent Goddess Mansā or Moniṣā Devī, who can kill with one eye and revive with the other, personifies this relation splendidly (Smith 1985). Like the venomous and harmful snake which becomes a friend and servant of Kṛṣṇa, the ass who is the disease might be best seen as Śītālā’s ambiguous and potential power or energy (*śakti*), which can become beneficial or useful when it is controlled—by the deity herself or by the priests. Another way to explain this ambivalence is to identify the disease as a demonic attack on a village or on a human body, which the goddess then takes on herself, burning herself in pain, and sharing this pain and heat with humans to ward off the attack:

She is inflamed by its heat and needs to be cooled, and may be cooled by the fanning of the disease-heated humans, while the latter may also be cooled by pouring water over her image [. . .]; she delights in the disease, is aroused by it, goes mad with it; she kills with it and uses it to give new life. (Brubaker 1978, cited in Kinsley 1987, p. 208)

It would be easy to diagnose in these words a “Western” or modern desire for an all-encompassing mother, harmonizing life and death, noble savages and cruel barbarians into one single phantasy. Nevertheless, this description of South Indian village goddesses resembles, in many ways, the way Himalayan villagers described their goddess to me. Her *doṣ*, a kind of “ontological disease” befalling a whole village, is “not so much the result of a divine being’s ill will as an automatic result of people’s failure to complete their religious duties” (Sax 2002, p. 49). Sometimes, when people described to me how a *doṣ* works, I got the impression that they thought of it as some kind of automatism. More often, however, I got the impression that they imagined it rather as an emotional response than as an automatic reaction—a slight difference, which does not change the fact that no one considered Naiṇī Devī to be evil, or to willfully punish her own people, as some other gods might do. Prem Vallabh Sati, a leading figure in the religion of the nine Naiṇīs, explained it to me by remembering how I feel when I “get nothing to eat and to drink” (Hi. *khānā-pīnā nahīm milegā*):

- PVS: Because the goddess is angry (*uskā prakop hai*), there will be some sickness, the cows and some children will be sick [. . .]. That is her *doṣ*.
- Q: So, is it the rage and anger (*gussāī*) of the Goddess that had caused all this misfortune?
- PVS: Yes.
- Q: Why is she so angry?
- PVS: Because she has not been worshipped! It is like when you get nothing to eat and to drink! The body of the goddess will be dissatisfied. That is why children, cows and oxen get sick and men lose their jobs, bears and monkeys enter the village. That is her anger.

Interview in Bainoli village, September 2018.

The consent of Prem Vallabh Sati has been obtained.

Wherever in Pindar valley I went, I was told that the goddess is powerful, but also very dangerous and has to be controlled so that she would not harm her own human kin. This was not so because she was regarded as imbalanced or immoral, but because she is seen as an impulsive (*vyākul*) child, forever 9 years old, who gets impatient or dissatisfied (*nārāz*) when she is not worshipped. This kind of “hangry” dissatisfaction has to be considered as

bodily and emotional at once.⁹ The Hindi term *doṣ* (Sk. *doṣa*) encompasses the mixture of psycho-physiological humors within the human body as well as unfortunate constellations of stars and planets, and the kind of disease which befalls a whole village or region. As Naiṇī Devī's name means *nāginī* or female cobra (Lange 2019a), her *doṣ* is as much associated with venom as the *nāg doṣ* of the Himalayan god Kṛṣṇa Nāgrāj (Jassal 2020) and the *nāga doṣam* of South Indian serpent goddesses (Alloco 2013, p. 234).

Inhabitants of the Indian Western Himalayas categorize bodily, emotional, social and environmental phenomena along the distinction of “hot” and “cold” states.¹⁰ In Kumaon, Leavitt explains, the idiom of hot and cold is used

to characterize types of people, places, times, foods, medicaments, temperaments, and bodily and mental states, to mention only a few domains. The common element is that hot conditions involve greater movement within an entity and interaction among entities, while cold ones involve less movement and greater isolation [. . .]. The appropriate balancing of these qualities is understood as a proper flow that takes the form of health and happiness. (Leavitt 1996, p. 521)

In a similar manner, South Indian systems of medicine identify emotions, character traits and diseases with bodily substances (*dhātu*) and their temperature (Daniel 1984, p. 173). The analogism contained in systems such as *siddha* medicine resembles medieval European humoral pathology and terms of traditional Chinese medicine.¹¹ The structure of hot and cold states connects or even unites the South Indian systems of medicine with religious practice, wherein cold and hot (meta-)physical states are identified with milk and blood and with white and red flowers (ibid., p. 208)—quite in tune with other South Asian constellations of cool and hot Goddesses (Schuler 2012) alias “milk mothers” and “blood mothers” (Sax 2002, p. 142). Schuler (2018, 2012) shows how South Indian Goddesses can change their emotional disposition, or rather are made change, when people change the food they ritually offer them. Their temper is no more static than a temperature: A mood which is “cool” can become hot, and a “hot” temper can be cooled down. Because a “hot goddess”, i.e., a goddess in an energized bodily or emotional state, can be extremely dangerous,¹² her heat has to be cooled with water or with other cool substances, such as milk, inducing “stabilized, sterile, and nonprocreative states” (Daniel 1984, p. 198).

In dealing with deities as well as with bodily afflictions, “cool” substances such as milk play a central role in cooling down healing “fiery” afflictions, like fever or emotional arousal. This connects ethnographic accounts of bodily afflictions and dangerous goddesses with Old Indian systems of medicine, wherein “cool” (Sk. *saumya*) substances already serve as an antidote to afflictions considered “hot” (*āgneya*), caused by some form of excessive energy (Das 2003, p. 522). The later Sanskrit term is derived from *agni*, denoting fire and also the god Fire, while *saumya* is linked to the moon and/or the elixir of immortality (both *soma*).¹³ The later is more commonly known as *a-mṛta*—meaning “im-mortality”, and also sharing an Indo-European etymology with the English word. This historical and, I argue, still prevalent connection of the ultimate healing substance with a word for medical and meta-physical “coolness” raises an interesting possibility to read one of the most far-spread and influential myths of South Asia as containing this whole complex in a nutshell.

4. The Churning of the Ocean: A Cosmic and Inner-Bodily Alchemy?

The *samudramanṭhana* episode, the “churning of the ocean”, can be read as a cosmic alchemy, a transformation of substances on an all-encompassing scale, which also reflects the inner alchemy of digestion and spiritual refinement.¹⁴ The first book of the *Mahābhārata* epic embeds this story within the story of the birth of the Nāgas, the serpent deities, and their archenemy Garuḍa. To sum it up as shortly as possible, Devas and Asuras (badly translatable as “gods” and “demons”) cooperate with the Nāga king Vāsuki, whom they use as a rope tied around the mountain Mandarā to churn the ocean. Mixed with the juices of various herbs, the ocean first turns into milk, then into butter and ghee, and finally into *amṛta*. This transformation means a concentration: A whole ocean and its potential

finally concentrates into one pot of *amṛta*, which is thus conceived as an “essence” in the alchemistic sense. The process is described as bodily exhausting and extremely violent, producing dangerous and weakening kind of heat from the body of the serpent Vāsuki:

Puffs of fire belched forth from his mouth. The clouds of smoke became massive clouds with lightning flashes and rained down on the troupes of the gods, who were weakening with the heat and fatigue [. . .]. Then Indra the Lord of the Immortals flooded the fire that was raging everywhere with rain pouring from the clouds. The many juices of herbs and the manifold resins of the trees flowed into the water of the ocean. And with the milk of these juices that had the power of the Elixir, and with the exudation of the molten gold, the Gods attained immortality. The water of the ocean now turned into milk, and from this milk butter floated up, mingled with the finest essences. (*Mahābhārata* 1.16.15–16 & 25–27, trsl. van Buitenen 1973, p. 73f.)

Some *Mahābhārata* editions and later *Purāṇa* versions of this myth add a poison called *halāhala* or *kālakūṭa* (“black mass”), which also emerges from the milk ocean. Balancing the essence that brings immortality, it threatens to bring death over everyone:

Kālakūṭa arose like fire burning all the worlds. The smell of it sent the three worlds into a swoon. At the request of Brahmā Śiva swallowed the poison to save the world from absolute destruction. And, he (Śiva) retained it in his throat.

(Mani 1975, p. 372; cf. Figure 3)



(a)



(b)

Figure 3. (a) Shiva’s *Viṣ Pān* (“Drinking of the Poison”) during the *Samudramanathan* (“Churning of The Ocean”); (b) Shiva as *Nāṭarājā*, “king of the dance” in a fiery halo (two posters by the artists Ramchand and H.R. Raja, printed by Brijbasi & Sons in Delhi. Acquired 1989 by Stephan Nagel and given to the Marburg Museum of Religions; acc. nr. B-Lp 149 14 & 6. Photos by Heike Luu, permission granted).

Is this another instance of a Pan-Hindu idea that an ontological disease, understood as destructive heat, has to be healed by cooling? As this story is known all over South and Southeast Asia, even reappearing in a huge 3-D display at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Thailand, it may be argued that this story has indeed had a huge impact on the spreading of ideas. The metaphor of condensed energy as heat might not produce a completely coherent ontology, a world systematically structured around the dichotomy of hot and cold substances.¹⁵ It is nevertheless generative for models of the world and of the human body alike. The churning of the milk ocean brings forth not only the amṛta, but also a prototypical tree, a cow, a horse, an elephant, and various goddesses and gods. It is a creation myth, telling about how a powerful substance is heated to release its power, both the power to destroy and the power to heal.

In the Upaniṣads (dated back to the 9th to 8th century BCE), the alchemy within the human body resembles the cosmic alchemy of the ocean turned to milk, to ghee, and to the essence of immortality:

When coagulated milk (*dadhan*) is churned, its finest essence (*somya*) rises upwards and becomes ghee (*sarpis*). Likewise, the finest essence of food (*anna*), when it is eaten, rises upwards and becomes mind (*manas*). When water is drunk, its finest essence rises upwards and becomes breath (*prāṇa*). The finest ‘essence of eaten fire/splendor’ (*tejasah somyāśyamānasya*) rises upwards and becomes speech.¹⁶

The commentary attributed to Śaṅkara identifies the eaten “fire” or “splendor” (*tejas*) with oil, ghee and the like (*tejo śitaṃ tailaghr̥tādi bhakṣitaṃ*).

To be sure, tracing back current concepts of divine bodies as “cool” (*saumya*) and “fiery” (*āgneya*) to texts nearly 3000 years ago is highly problematic. The relationship of *saumya* to the Vedic *soma*, which turned into another word for the *amṛta* and for essence (*somya*) in general, is a weak ground for speculations about human and divine bodies and emotions. What can be uphold, however, is a continuity of fire as a source of energy and transformation. Since Vedic times, Agni, the god “Fire”, serves as *devamukha*, the “mouth of the gods”, because oblations of ghee are poured into the fire to feed the gods in *havan* rituals. The God Fire, the ritual fire, and the cosmic fire emerging from the mouth of the serpent Vāsuki during the churning of the ocean blend with the physiological concept of *agni vaiśvānara*, the “fire within all men”:

It is inside [every] man and cooks/digests the food that is eaten. It makes a sound which he can hear when he covers his ears. When he is about to pass away, he cannot hear that sound anymore.¹⁷

The point I want to make is that “heat”—as ambivalent energy, as intense emotion and as bodily pain—connects current ethnographic and ethnomedical practices in South Asia with Old Indian concepts. The Gond figure of Kṛṣṇa which becomes “cold”, lifeless and devoid of the god’s presence (see above) draws from a specifically South Asian conceptual and aesthetic blending of “heat” with “passion”, “anger” and “eagerness”—all of which are possible meanings of Sk. *uṣma* and other words.¹⁸

5. Hot and Cold Divine Bodies and Emotions in Sanskrit Mythology

According to the film song introducing this article, the “fire of revenge” (Hi. *pratighāt kī jvalā*) transforms a human, angry woman into an incarnation of the Goddess. This demonstrates that the heat—identified with the emotion of anger—is not per se bad, but a motivational force, a non-stable condition for change and creativity. As outlined above, the cool and fierce temperaments of goddesses (*saumya* and *ugra*) correspond to the “cool” and “hot” qualities of health and diseases, and to the emotional qualities of calmness and anger.

Mythology, in a nonsystematic way, encompasses theories of the body, the psyche and the environment. A blending of anger with heat appears in South Asia as early as in the *R̥gveda*, which links the warlike deity Manyu (“anger, temper, passion”) with heat and fire:

Protect us, Anger, united with Heat!
pāhi no manyo tapasā sajoṣāḥ (R̥gveda 10.43.2)

O Anger, be shining/excited/agitated like fire!
agnir iva manyo tviṣitah (R̥gveda 10.44.2)

Classical myths from the epics and *Purāṇas* describe diverse physical and emotional phenomena as metamorphoses of the same “hot” being or substance, linking anger with fire and fever, death (*mṛtyu*), menstruation and the diseases of animals and plants. *Mṛtyu*, the goddess Death, is born from the pores of *Brahmā*, the creator, when he draws into his body a “fire, born from his rage” (*agni roṣaja*) into his body (*Mahābhārata* 12.249.15; see Lange 2020, p. 199). In an influential narrative, the gods assemble their collective anger as one “fiery mass”. After *Mahiṣa*, the buffalo demon, had expelled the gods from heaven,

from *Viṣṇu*’s face, which was filled with rage, came forth a great fiery splendor (*tejas*), (and also from the faces) of *Brahmā* and *Śiva*. And from the bodies of the other gods, *Indra* and the others, came forth a great fiery splendor, and it became unified in one place. An exceedingly fiery mass like a flaming mountain did the gods see there, filling the firmaments with flames. That peerless splendor, born from the bodies of all the gods, unified and pervading the triple world with its lustre, became a woman. (*Devīmahatmya* 2.9–12, trsl. Coburn 1991, p. 40)

Even such a “daughter of an ocean of blood” (*lohitasya udadheḥ kanyā*), a “woman born or consisting of anger” (*nārī krodhasam-udbhavā*) can display motherly and tender behavior when overcome by *vātsalya rati*, by motherly love (*Mahābhārata* 3.215.21–22, my translation).

In another story, the divine heat/anger is not collected and brought together from the singular gods, but comes from one god and is then distributed among the species. To help the god *Indra* in killing the serpent demon *Vṛtra*, *Śiva* manifests his heat/energy (*tejas*) and anger (*krodha*) in a drop of sweat (*svedabindu*), from which rises the personified Fever (*jvara*). *Jvara* then enters the body of the serpent demon *Vṛtra* to kill him: Out of the yawning mouth of the dying demon “emerged his memory in a terrifying and frightful shape, from his ribs sprung glowing meteors”, when, “heavily afflicted by this fever, he yawned.”¹⁹ Finally, out of his slain body came forth *Brahmahatyā*, the personified sin of “murdering a Brahman”—as, in this version, *Vṛtra* also happens to be a Brahman. Different being then distribute *Brahmahatya* among themselves, transforming her into different kinds of affliction: Fire (*Agni*) takes a part, while other parts are distributed among the trees, herbs and grasses, among the women when they menstruate and the waters when they are heated (*Mahābhārata* 12.274.32–46). The heated waters (*mahātapāḥ apah*, verse 46) perhaps refer to hot springs, while the reappearance of fever “among the women when they menstruate” (*rajasvalāsu nārīṣu*, v. 44) plays with the double meaning of Sk. *rajas* both as the hot and energetic quality (*guṇa*) of nature, and as “menstruation” (see below, part 6).

Brahmahatyā appears as a frightful fury (*mahāghorā raudrā*) emerging from *Vṛtra*’s slain body (*vṛtrasya . . . śarīrād abhiniḥṣṭā*). Like other fierce Goddesses,

she has proceeding teeth, is ghastly and deformed and of a darkish brown color; her hair is disheveled and her eyes are fearsome. She wears a garland of skulls, is soaked with blood, haggard and clothed in rugs.

(*Mahābhārata* 12.273.10–12, my translation)

The story of how *Śiva* further “distributed the fever into many forms” (*jvaram ca sarvadharmojño bahudhā vyaśṛjat*; *ibid.*, verse 49) supports an analogistic worldview in which every quality in one species corresponds to a respective quality in another. Thus, different kinds of beings are connected by each having an own form of “heat” or “fever”:

Headache of elephants, bitumen in the mountain [. . .], the shedding of the skin of snakes, a hoof disease (*khoraka*) of the cows, the children of *Surabhī*, salt on Earth’s surface, impaired vision among cattle, the *randhrāgata* disease befalling the throats of horses, fissures in the crests/combs of peacocks, an eye-disease of the Indian Cuckoo are all called *jvara*. Also the bile-breaking (*pittabheda*) of

the waterborn [lotuses or conches], the hiccup (*hikkikā*) of parrots are called *jvara*, as is also the exhaustion/fatigue (*śrama*) of tigers. Among humans it is heard of as fever (*jvara*), which enters (*ā-viśate*) a man during death, birth, or in midst of his life: it is the dreadful *tejas* of Śiva. (ibid., verses 50–55, my translation)

In Sanskrit, *āveśa*, an “entering”, appears as a word for humans being possessed or entered by diseases, but also by moods, deities and spirits (see Smith 2006, p. 246). The heat of Śiva, his *tejas*, appears in many myths as a potentially world-consuming, uncontrollable force—with the god being sometimes unable to control his own passions, embodied in his lustrous semen.

In classical Sanskrit mythology, fire—especially the fire contained in a submarine mare—both is and represents passion. This horse appears, for instance, in the story of Āruṣi, a pregnant Brahmin woman who was hunted by Kṣatriya kings. When they caught her, she gave birth to a son from her thighs. Thus, his name is Aurva, derived from *ūru*, “thigh”. Born in such an unusual way and in such a distressed situation, he was angry from birth on, which manifested as heat:

Aurva was born with fiery radiance and the sudden effulgence made the Kṣatriya Kings blind [. . .]. Aurva bore a deep grudge against the Kṣatriyas who had massacred his forefathers. Aurva started doing rigorous penance and by the force of his austerities the world started to burn.

[He said]: ‘While I was lying in the thigh-womb of my mother I heard hideous groans from outside and they were of our mothers when they saw the heads of our fathers being cut off by the swords of the Kṣatriyas. Even from the womb itself I nurtured a fierce hatred towards the Kṣatriyas.’

[Finally], Aurva withdrew the fire of his penance and forced it down into the sea. It is now believed that this fire taking the shape of a horse-head is still living underneath the sea vomiting heat at all times. This fire is called Baḍavāgni. (Mani 1975, p. 76, paraphrasing *Mahābhārata* 1.179f.)

Not only anger, but also love can be understood as heat. Insofar as these emotions are not only *understood* but bodily *felt* as heat, “burning” with love or “seething” with anger is less metaphorical than, for instance, speaking of love as a “journey”. It is still a metaphor, as there are alternative, even opposite ways to speak about anger, which can unfold into “frosty” as well as into “inflamed” behavior towards another person. The story of Aurva not only takes this metaphor at face value, but even enlarges it from the level of personal temper onto a cosmological plane, as the fiery horsehead under the sea continues to burn there until the end of the world. A somewhat cryptic explanation of what it does there is given by the Fathers or Ancestors (*pitara*), the divine beings who convince Aurva to remove that fire from the world it is about to destroy:

For Your own good, throw/discard (*muñca*) that fire which is “born from your rage” (*manyujas te*) and wants to seize the world. All worlds “are based on/depend on water” (*apsu pratiṣṭhitāḥ*), every substance (*rasa*) is watery (*āpomaya*), the whole universe is watery. Therefore, release (*vimuñca*) this “fire of your wrath” (*krodhāgni*) into the waters, oh best of the twice-born [Brahmins], and let it stay in the big ocean, burning/consuming (*dahant*) its waters.

(*Mahābhārata* 1.171.17–20, my translation)

Thus naturalized or translated onto a cosmic scale, Aurva’s anger can persist, as it would be wrong “to suppress an anger born from a reason” (*kāraṇataḥ krodhaṃ samjātaṃ kṣantum*; ibid., verse 3).

Jumping into the present, we find the Hindi word *jalnā*, “to burn”, as a term for being jealous. The word appears, perhaps most famously, in the song *Rādhā kaise na jale* (“How could Rādhā not be Jealous?”) from the famous Indian movie *Lagaan* (2001). As usual in Hindi films, the song carries a whole musical film scene, which blends the “fire of jealousy” of a female human lover from the film plot with the divine jealousy of a superhuman

being. Rādhā, the lover of God Kṛṣṇa in his human form, is herself often identified with the goddess Lakṣmī in her human form. This multi-level blending of a human feeling with a divine feeling shapes a concept of jealousy “as such”, which films can translate onto a worldly, human setting—drawing from a cultural background known to most of the film’s viewers. The “love games” of Kṛṣṇa with Rādhā, and with other human cowherder girls, the Gopīs, provide the background vocabulary of emotions in the poems and images of the religious *bhakti* movement (Redington 1983; cf. Holdrege 2015, p. 81f.).

6. “Baked in the Fever of Feeling”: The Hot Love for Kālī and Kṛṣṇa in *Bhakti* Poetry

[Kālī’s] name has lit the incense of my body.
The more it burns, the further the fragrance spreads.
My love is like incense, rising ceaselessly.
To touch Mother’s lovely feet in Shiva’s temple.
With that holy fragrance my soul is blessed.
Oh, Mother’s smiling face floats in my mind
Like the moon in the blue sky.
When will everything of mine be burnt, and turned to ashes forever?
I’ll adorn Mother’s forehead with those glorious ashes.

Kazi Nazrul Islam, cited in (McDaniel 2017, p. 127).

The 20th century writer, muezzin and anticolonial revolutionary Kazi Nazrul Islam has been named the national poet of Bangladesh. He is not only “a Muslim writer who uses Hindu imagery” (ibid., p. 126), but even within Hindu imagery makes a transfer: Comparing Kālī’s face with the moon and expressing in his poems a “mixture of devotion and anger” and “divine love in separation, the mood of vipralambha” (ibid.), he evokes images and emotions more widely associated with God Kṛṣṇa. This cross-over draws from the Bengali movement of *Śākta bhakti*, in which the fierce Goddess Kālī appears as a loving mother (ibid., p. 123). In this poem, *Śyāmā’s Name*, Kālī is even called by a name she shares with Kṛṣṇa, *Śyāma* (All three Sanskrit words, *śyāma*, *kṛṣṇa* and *kāla*, denote a color specter from black to blue). The lyrical narrator’s desire to be burned by his own love for the divine Mother synaesthetically blends with the fragrance of incense, the sight of her moonlike smile, the desired sensation of touching Mother’s forehead and, of course, the pain of being burnt to ashes.

Being consumed by the fiery pain of love is a central theme in Kṛṣṇa *bhakti*, a word which denote at once the feeling of “devotion” or “belonging” to Kṛṣṇa and the religious movements centered around this emotion. This movement, which can be traced back to the 6th/7th century *Ālvār* poetry of Tamil speaking South India, encompasses a desire to taste²⁰ Kṛṣṇa’s sweetness, to see his face, to smell his fragrance—and, unsurprisingly, to feel the pain of being burnt alive in the fulfillment of one’s desire. In 16th century Rajasthan, Mīrā Bāī evoked the “heat” and “fever” of love to express her longing for an emotional blending and a sensual encounter with Kṛṣṇa. Like divine anger, this kind of love is not simply “understood”, but “felt” as heat, both in the bodily and in the emotional sense:

My body is baked in the fever of feeling.
I spend my whole time hoping, friend.
Now that he’s come, I’m burning with love—
shot through, shameless to couple with him, friend.

bhāy rī śāebā paknī jar re/harom sameṃ āsā karī
ab to āṃne jarī prīta jāī/bīdha nālajā saṃjog rī

Mira’s Mountain-Lifter Lord, have mercy, cool this body’s fire!

mīrā girdhar suāmī deāl tan kī tapat bujhāī rī māī

Mīrā Bāī, trsl. (Hawley 2005, pp. 107, 168).

Mīrā Bhaī’s *bhakti*, the “devotion” or “belonging” to Kṛṣṇa, appears less as a cognitive belief than as a deeply embodied religious feeling in her poems, which can be attributed

with some confidence to the 16th century poet herself (cf. *ibid.*, p. 89 ff.). The sort of fever (*jar*) baking her body is different from Old Indian *jvara*, the fever which incarnates, according to the *Mahābhārata*, in menstruation, in hot springs or the headache of elephants. However, it shares some bodily symptoms: According to the poet Sūr Dās, contemplating the beauty of Kṛṣṇa's face can make "the eyes vomit in pain" as a result from a visual "overdrinking" of his "sweetness":

My eyes have become so greedy—they lust for his juice [*rasa*]; They refuse to be satisfied, drinking in [*pīvat*] the beauty of his lotus face, the sweetness of his words [*madhu bain*]. Day and night they fashion their picture of him and never blink a moment for rest. What an ocean of radiance! But where's it going to fit in this cramped little closet of a heart? And now with raw estrangement [*birah*] its waters surge so high that the eyes vomit [*bāmī lāgyau*] in pain [*duṣ*]: Sur says, the Lord of Braj—the doctor—has gone. Who can I send to Mathura to fetch him here again? (*ibid.*, p. 169)

Of course, 16th century poets and the anonymous authors of a Sanskrit text dated back around 2000 years do not share the same figurative language. However, Sūr Dās and Mīrā Bāī draw from a deep pool of extremely complex synaesthetic metaphors, wherein beauty tastes sweet and can be drunken with the eyes.²¹ Mīrā Bāī also drinks from this pool of poetic metaphors:

These eyes: like clouds that gather
filled with love—with desire.
Drenched with the liquid pleasure of making love [*ras rasīle*],
flushed with what makes a woman color [*raṅg raṅgīle*] (*ibid.*, p. 111).

These lines from an early 18th century manuscript from Jodhpur play with synaesthetic connotations of several words for love, based on Sanskrit words for "fluid/juice" (*rasa*) and "color" (*raṅga* and *rāga*). The later term, *rāga*, also denotes the auditive and emotional "colors" or moods of music.²² It therefore seems close at hands for Mīrā to imagine Kṛṣṇa, in another poem, as "passion-red" (*raṅg rātau*), which is arguably the "warmest" color, befitting the "Seducer of Love" (*Madanmohan*) himself, who deludes even the intoxicating power of Kāma, the god of desire (*ibid.*, p. 107).

In the poems of Mīrā and Sūr, both the fulfilling as well as the emptying aspects of love appear as different kinds of heat: A pregnant woman is claimed to experience "heat in the good sense—the heat of the internal hearth, the heat of cooking", while a *virahinī*, a lovesick woman or any devotee of Kṛṣṇa who feels far away from her or his god, is "assaulted by bad heat—a fever she cannot control" (*ibid.*, p. 176). When this is combined with the cross-culturally far spread metaphor of relations as "bonds" and "binding", this conceptual, aesthetic and emotional blending of different sensual experiences enables the poets to describe love as a wound and as its bandage, as a disease caused as well as healed by the lover:

The body is female, and love is a wound [. . .]. To change the metaphor slightly, as Mira does herself, love is a disease—the affliction of being absent from one's beloved. The wound itself is in the nature of a bond, a bondage: the verb *bāṅdhiu* is cognate to both these English words. But paradoxically, the wound also needs to be bound. It needs bandaging—and in saying that, we are still within the semantic realm of the word *bāṅdhiu*. This is just right, for the only true treatment is the lover's return. He is the cause of the disease, he is also its cure and sole physician. (*ibid.*, p. 168)

When Mīrā says about Kṛṣṇa that he has bound her heart with his *guṇas*, which might be alternatively translated as his "powers", "qualities" or "ropes", all these possibilities inherent in the word interlace with each other.²³ Each of the mentioned Sanskrit terms, *guṇa*, *rasa* and *rāga*, opens up too vast an ocean of meanings to explore in this article, as they all played various roles and referred to manifold things throughout the history of philosophy, aesthetic theory and psychology in South Asia. I will, therefore, only briefly

mention some aspects from Old Indian philosophy which still have an impact on the way people perceive, and conceive of, their goddesses and gods. As the “heat” of the portrayed fierce goddesses is associated with the “quality” (*guṇa*) of “passion” (*rajas*), let us approach this complicated concept through one of the most famous scenes from Old Indian literature.

7. *Guṇas* and *Rasas* as Blends of Emotional, Sensual and Bodily Experience

In a key scene of the *Mahābhārata*, Draupadī, the heroine, is nearly raped by her husbands’ cousins. Predicting or setting in motion their downfall, she curses them “crying, with disheveled hair and full of passion, her clothes stained with blood.”²⁴ Because *rajasvalā*, “passionate”, might also mean “covered with dust”, or even “menstruating”, there is a short way for the Hindu imagination to jump “from the blood of Draupadī’s vengeance to the blood of sacrifice to the blood of Kali’s victims” (Sax 2002, p. 142). In the local *Mahābhārata* epics and performances of Garhwal, Draupadī and Kuntī, her mother-in-law, serve as prototypes for the “hot” and “cold” goddesses, the blood drinking and milk giving types of mother.²⁵ The contrast between blood and milk affirms (and is itself increased by) the aesthetic blending of redness with heat.

The Old Indian *Sāṃkhya* system of philosophy elaborates the polyvalent term, *rajas*, as one of the three *guṇas*, alongside *tamas* and *sattva*. The *guṇas* are the “qualities” of everything in “nature” (Sk. *prakṛti*), of everything which “brings forth” (*pra-kr*) itself, analogous to Latin *natura* and Greek *physis*. These three abstract concepts are drawn from bodily experience and from a blending of different sensual qualities: The *Sāṃkhyakārikā* describes *rajas* as “exciting, encouraging” (*upaśtambhaka*), and “moving, disturbed, unsteady” (*cala*). The other two qualities are *sattva*, which is “light(-hearted), easy” (*laghu*), and “illuminating” (*prakāśaka*), and *tamas*, which is heavy (*guru*) and obscuring (*varaṇaka*).²⁶ This short description blends sensual qualities of bodily movement and balance (proprioception, motor control) with visual and emotional qualities.²⁷ Interestingly, *prakāśaka* (“shining”) and *laghu* bring together both potential meanings of the English word “light”.

This philosophical ontology informs mythological conceptions of divine bodies as well: The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* describes how Brahmā, the creator god, appears in different bodies, consisting of *tamas*, *rajas*, and *sattva*, to create different beings. In the course of this sequence, he first takes “a body made of *tamas*” (*tamomātrātmikam tanum*), from which he creates the Asuras and the night, then another body made of *sattva*, from which the Devas and the day emerge (*Viṣṇupurāṇa* 1.5.32–34). To Devas and Asuras, which can be very roughly translated as “gods” and “demons”, he adds the Pitṛs, the “fathers” or “ancestors”, born from another body made of *sattva*, and the humans, who are “drunk with the quality of passion” (*rajomātrotkatā*; *ibid.*, p. 37), Then, from another body consisting of passion,

from which Brahmā’s hunger was born, which gave birth to anger. Thus, in the darkness, the Lord created monstrous beings, bearded and wasted by hunger, which rushed upon him.²⁸

These beings, the Rākṣasas and Yakṣas, embody his hunger (*kṣudh*), while his and anger (*kopa*, *krodha*) turns into “angry beings, reddish in color, the violent ghosts and ghouls (*krodhātmano* [. . .] *varṇena kapiṣenogrā bhūtās te piśitāśanāḥ*; *ibid.*, p. 45). He is so displeased (*apriyant*) by their sight that he loses his hair (*keśāḥ śīryanta*), which turns into snakes (*sarpa*; *ibid.*, pp. 44–45). Gods and other nonhuman species are, thus, different from humans in their physiology and psychology—but they do not belong to a completely different nature (*prakṛti*), as they do have bodies and feelings as such. Even the creator himself can get hungry, his hunger can turn into anger, and anger is associated with the color red and with poisonous animals. Similar aesthetic blends continue in current practices of “cooling down” the temperature and temperament of a “hot goddess” (Schuler 2012, 2018). It does not apply to divine, but also to human bodies and emotions: Throughout South Asia, “one is always likely to become what he eats” (Inden and Marriot 1977, p. 233).

A main Hindi term for emotion, *bhāva*, provides further evidence for the inseparability of bodily and psychological states in South Asian cultures, as it stems from *bhāva*, a Sanskrit

word for any “state of being”. This term features prominently in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a theatre manual which entails a complex taxonomy of feelings and technical instructions for how specific stage emotions, the eight *rasas*, can be produced by the interplay of various *bhāvas*. Rasa is the “taste” of a theatre scene—and, in later literature, of any piece of art—which is produced, in analogy to cooking, by the skillful arrangement of various ingredients. *Nāṭyaśāstra* 6.32 compares an educated and sophisticated audience with gourmets (*bhaktavid*), as both have learned how to “taste” (*āsvādayanti*) something which has been prepared in a refined way. The “taste” of a successful play emerges from the synesthetic mixture of bodily, sensual and emotional states (re)presented on stage:

When an [artistic] representation speaks to the heart, its *bhāva* (feeling/affect) brings forth *rasa*. It completely pervades/covers the body like fire [devours] wood.²⁹

The “taste of erotic love” (*śṛṅgāra-rasa*) later evolved to play a major role in religious practice and aesthetic theory (Raghavan [1940] 1976, p. 130 ff.). Therefore, it provides a fine example for the blending of sensual and emotional experience into one mood. According to *Nāṭyaśāstra* 6.46, the concept of *śṛṅgāra* encompasses “everything in the world that looks pure/bright, full of sap and blazing up” (*yatkiñcilloke śuci medhyam ujjoalam darśanīyam*). Accordingly, it is to be stimulated or represented on stage by ingredients such as “flower garlands, ointments, a joyfull stroll through the woods and flirting games” (*mālyānulepana- [...]-vanopabhogopavanagamana- [...]-krīḍātilātibhir*). The mood of *śṛṅgāra* stimulates further emotional and bodily states, consequences such as “amiable movements of the eyes and eyebrows, side glances, charming movements and sweet postures and words” (*nayana-cāturya-bhrūkṣepa-kaṭākṣa-sañcāra-lalita-madhurāṅgahāra-vākya*), which are also to be presented on stage to evoke the mood. The words used already blend qualities perceived by different sense organs into one sensual quality: *madhura* (“sweet, pleasant, melodious”) stems from *madhu*, “honey” or “mead”, while *lalita* (“charming, soft, gentle”) comes from *lal* or *laḍ*, “to lick, to behave loosely”. Apart from this variety minor *bhāvas* which are staged as “ingredients” (*vibhāva*) and “consequences” (*anubhāva*), *śṛṅgāra*, as the other *rasas*, is associated with one prominent “stable state” (*sthāyi-bhāva*), the feeling of love or desire (*rati*).

“Blazing up” (*ujjoala*), as *Nāṭyaśāstra* 6.46 characterizes erotic love to be, has therefore become another word for *śṛṅgāra-rasa* itself (Raghavan [1940] 1976, p. 145) Does love, thus, “look” brilliant, or is its brilliance rather a matter of how it feels—supposedly, hot as fire—, or how it tastes? Later elaborations and extensions of the list of *rasas* also added more synaesthetic terms—for instance, Rudraṭa, a 9th ct. theorist of literature, added nonsexual love (*preyas*) as another *rasa*, emerging from the *sthāyi-bhāva* of “attachment” (*sneha*; cf. *ibid.*, p. 120). The Sanskrit word *sneha* does not only denote love and attachment, but also “oiliness”, “greasiness” or “smoothness”, as it comes from the verbal root *snih*, “to be adhesive or sticky”. It becomes even more synaesthetic in the 13th ct. *Kaivalyadīpika*, which mentions within few lines:

- The “tasting” (*svāda*) of *śṛṅgāra-rasa* and of the “mournful” or “pityful” *karuṇa-rasa*;
- The “touch of sorrow” (*śoka-sparśa*)—*śoka* being derived from the verbal root *śuc* (“to burn, to be in pain, to grieve”)—;
- The “sight of the devotional *rasa*” (*bhakti-rasa-darśana*), which is here established as the leading *rasa* (Raghavan [1940] 1976, p. 144).

2000 years after the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was composed, Hindi films seem to still follow its recipe for brewing a romantic or erotic mood out of ingredients such as strolling through the forest, teasing side glances and flower garlands. According to Philipp Lutgendorf, Indian cinema draws from an ancient “synaesthetic discourse”, in which looking is understood as an exchange of substances (Lutgendorf 2008, p. 45). What Lutgendorf calls “synaesthetic” is not what is, by now, usually understood by this term, namely a neurological condition. To avoid confusion, I propose “aesthetic blending” as a new term to deal with the blending of various sensual qualities into one “taste” of emotion, one *rasa*, or with the experience of divine anger as a “hot disease” or as the “fire of revenge”, which might transform any

angry woman into an angry goddess. Insofar as an emotion is a bodily perception (Koch 2020, p. 29), these aesthetic blendings are no conceptual metaphors by which people “conceptualize the nonphysical in terms of the physical” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 59). In the other hand, emotions are also studied as culturally specific practices, learned, trained and attuned to social expectations. Rather than an object of a sense perception, emotions might be described as qualities of perception itself, escaping any attempt to catch them in a dichotomy of mind and body, or of nature and culture. The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, however, does not seem to deem it paradoxical to describe *rasa* as a fire devouring the body, while it is also stated that a *rasa* can only be “tasted” by sophisticated people who have learned how to taste it.

8. (Syn)Aesthetic Blends and Conceptual Metaphors

An embodied spirituality requires an aesthetic attitude to the world [. . .]. It requires pleasure, joy in the bodily connection with earth and air, sea and sky, plants and animals [. . .]. It is the body that makes spiritual experience passionate, that brings to it intense desire and pleasure, pain, delight, and remorse [. . .]; sex and art and music and dance and the taste of food [. . .]. The mechanism by which spirituality becomes passionate is metaphor. An ineffable God requires metaphor not only to be imagined but to be approached, exhorted, confronted, struggled with, and loved. (Johnson and Lakoff 1999, p. 566f.)

By these words, reading surprisingly religious, the most prominent theorists of conceptual metaphors apply their theory on the religions between humans and deities. If not only mental endeavours such as philosophy, religion or spirituality have to be embodied, but also gods have to turn into “flesh” to be approached by humans, this theory might serve well to show that Hindu worlds are not made from a completely different stuff than, say, may own rather secular middle European world.

As conceptual metaphor theory has shown, one does not have to be influenced at all by Hindu myths and rituals to understand that anger is heat, and heat is anger (Kövecses 2000, p. 75 ff.). In Hindu ontologies, however, it is often completely indiscernible whether the “anger” of a goddess is a metaphor for an impersonal, semi-physical heat or energy (*śakti*), or whether the “heat” is a metaphor for divine rage. For my interview partners in Pindar valley, it bore no contradiction to say that their goddess is not a feeling subject or person, and then, in the same conversation, to tell me stories about her acting out of fear or desire, like a human child. Whether it is an intense emotion or a metaphysical energy which comes over a human body in a state of possession, afterwards it has to be “cooled down”. This can happen implicitly: I often saw how a glass of water was waved in circles over the head of a woman, who sat on the ground exhausted afterwards, and then poured out onto the ground.

In the often barely bearable heat of South Asia, it is no wonder that “the quality of whiteness (purity) and cool (cooling flowers, cooling sandalwood) are generally considered very desirable” (Schuler 2018, p. 59, fn. 9). In India’s hot climate, it is not convincing that human bodily constitution generally disposes us to associate warmth with activity: in the hottest hours, no one feels activated at all. The categories of hot and cold oscillate between metaphorical, and literal modes of attribution, of blending different experiences into each other. Apart from the culturally specific understanding of divine *śakti*, the motive of hot emotions in heated divine bodies can be explained by a near-universal conceptual metaphor:

ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. This is a perfectly everyday metaphor we see in such linguistic examples as ‘boiling with anger’, ‘making one’s blood boil’, ‘simmer down’, ‘blowing your stack’. (Kövecses 2000, p. 22)

This metaphor is so widespread³⁰ and plausible because the bodily experience of anger includes sensations of heat, pressure, and bodily arousal—calming down, in turn, is likely to be associated with a downward motion, with cooling “down”, and with released pressure.

The metaphor highlights several aspects of this emotion at once, without necessarily forming a coherent picture: One might think of the devastating effects of a wildfire, of the bodily sensation of being enraged, and of the idea that anger, when allowed to be “let out”, even increases and lusts for more devastation, rather than be satisfied and saturated after some time. This metaphor also works the other way round—a wildfire can easily be described as “angry”. However, I want to make the point that this is not only a conceptual blending, but works, more fundamentally, on sensual and emotional planes.

Generalizing a “conceptual metaphor” or other neuropsychological concepts are not necessarily less problematic than Rudolf Otto’s belief in $\delta\rho\gamma\eta$, the Wrath of God, as a Universal religious experience. Himself a theologian and believer, he declared this “energy or urgency” to be “a genuine aspect of the divine nature” (Otto [1917] 1958, p. 23):

It everywhere clothes itself in symbolic expressions—vitality, passion, emotional temper, will, force, movement, excitement, activity, impetus [. . .], a force that knows not stint nor stay, which is urgent, active, compelling, and alive. In mysticism, too, this element of ‘energy’ is a very living and vigorous factor, at any rate in the ‘voluntaristic’ mysticism, the mysticism of love, where it is very forcibly seen in that ‘consuming fire’ of love whose burning strength the mystic can hardly bear, but begs that the heat that has scorched him may be mitigated, lest he be himself be destroyed by it. And in this urgency and pressure the mystic’s ‘love’ claims a perceptible kinship with the $\delta\rho\gamma\eta$ itself, the scorching and consuming wrath of God. (ibid., p. 23f.; cf. Figure 4)



Figure 4. Bengali Kālighat paintings of Durgā/Kālī in the Marburg Museum of Religion (acc.nr. B-Kp 037 (a,b); acquired by Otto in the early 20th ct. Photo by Heike Luu). Rudolf Otto, founder of the museum, referred to these images in the first German editions of *Das Heilige* (*The Idea of the Holy*) to illustrate the *tremendum*, a “repellent”, “horrible and dreadful” feeling of “authentic religious awe” towards the *Divine Wrath*, which he claimed to be archetypical for religious experience in general (Otto [1917] 1958, p. 62). Adapted with permission from Heike Luu.

Otto's description of a mystic's "perceptible kinship" with a passionate god might come close to the fire invoked in the poems quoted above, to Mīrā Bāī's body being "baked in the fever" of love for God Kṛṣṇa, or to Kazi Nazrul Islam's body burning like incense in love for Mother Kālī. The historical context and the cultural specificity of their poetry, however, gets lost when he jumps from the Hebrew Bible to the Bhāgavadgītā and back to Old Greece to find—or rather, to imagine—in all religions a similar emotional quality of divine energy. The study of religion has, fortunately, gone beyond such far-too-quick jumps and transcultural assimilations—therefore, the search for conceptual metaphors should not tempt me to do the same. And tempting, indeed, it is to follow Otto's musings and to wonder about the similarity of what I have described in this article with the Wrath of God, described in the Hebrew Bible "like a hidden force of nature, like stored-up electricity discharging itself upon anyone who comes too near" (ibid., p. 18). The goddesses who ward off diseases by being disease themselves, presented in the second chapter, prove Otto right when he describes Hindu practices and stories as characterized by such an energetic "ira deorum. To pass through the Indian Pantheon of gods is to find deities who seem to be made up altogether of such an ὀργή" (ibid.; cf. Figure 4).

Kṛṣṇa's beautiful face does not only look "sweet", but can be drunk by a thirsty lover with her eyes—at least in the poems of Sūr Dās, as well as in the much older *Harivamśa* (see Lange 2017). Tasting the "sweetness" of Kṛṣṇa and "drinking" his beauty with the eyes might be called "synaesthetic" in the sense of a poetic figure of speech (cf. Lutgendorf 2008, p. 45; Rein 1998). Understood as a trope, a rhetoric or stylistic device in literature or poetry, synaesthesia is a special, creative application of the "sensory teamwork" called "intermodal perception" (Koch 2020, p. 28), which ties together the perceptions of different sense organs into one reality.³¹ Earlier philosophical traditions had assigned this work to an additional sense, the *sensus communis* of European antiquity, or *manas* in the Old Indian *Sāṃkhya* school of thought. Religious dramaturgies and symbols make ample use of the human tendency to blend specific perceptions of different sense organs to intensify a mood:

Combined perceptions result in 'superadditivity' due to the enhancement of sensations, and may lead to euphoria, feelings of effervescence or a 'flow experience,' or, conversely, to a rescue or shock reaction. (Mohr 2020, p. 131)

These phenomena, however, are broader than the kind of aesthetic blending at issue here. Drinking the beauty of Kṛṣṇa, feeling the heat of an angry Goddess in one's body, or burning in devotion like fragrant incense, are experiences of "synaesthesia". This term, however, risks confusion of how it is used in neuropsychology, where it refers to a very specific condition of perception innate to a small percentage of humans: Only 4.4% are "synaesthetes", the others are not. The former "have synaesthesia", which is "a neurological condition that gives rise to a type of merging of the senses" (Simner 2019, p. 2). Qualities perceived by one sensual organ are "mapped" another, following strict rules. Recent research, however, suggests that the difference between those who "have" synaesthesia and the others may be not as absolute:

Non-synaesthetes, too, pair specific qualities of sound and colour, taste and shape, colour and texture, and so on. And their rules are sometimes the same as those of synaesthetes. These synaesthesia-like associations in non-synaesthetes are called cross-modal correspondences, and are intuitive feelings or preferences about how the senses 'fit' together [. . .]. Synaesthetes with coloured music tend to follow a specific rule: their synaesthetic colours from musical notes tend to be lighter when the pitch of the note is higher. But this association also feels intuitively right for all people [. . .]. To be convinced of this, simply imagine you are standing in front of a piano and gently tinkling the high notes, and then crashing down on the low notes. If I asked you which sound was pale yellow and which was dark purple you would likely have at least some intuition that the tinkling high notes were perhaps the pale colour while the low notes were the dark colour. And this

is the same rule we find in synaesthesia: A higher pitch triggers lighter colours. (ibid., pp. 90–91)³²

Even to speak about sounds as “higher” or “lower”, of melodies going “up” or “down”, or of scales being “brighter” or “darker”, we have to transfer the meaning of these works from one sense to the other.³³ These are conceptual metaphors, fundamental to speak about something for which we would, otherwise, not have any words at all. These metaphors are close at hand and partly body-based—for instance, derived from the experience that we produce “higher” sounds by placing our vocal chords higher in the throat.

Not only are metaphors body-based, but also bodily experience itself is based in metaphors and aesthetic blends. This holds especially true for the bodies of gods, which can only be studied as shaped by human imagination and by metaphors and blendings. These do not have to be consistent: Kṛṣṇa can be “hot” in his anger or in his loving, even though his blue color might be perceived as “cool.” I am able to conceive of blue as a “cool” color without perceiving it as emotionally “cold”—quite the contrary, I might conceive of sadness as blue and of the blue sky as a space filled with bliss and happiness. Many of these manifold and contradictory associations and connotations seem to be learned rather than innate. If aesthetic blends and other metaphors were fully determined by physiological and neurological universals, it would be pointless to speak of a metaphor at all: no active blending of semantic realms would be required to perceive specific harmonies and moods as brighter or darker, warmer or colder than others. The blending of an emotion such as anger with sensual qualities such as heat and with “hot colors” can change over time.³⁴ This gives more weight to my argument for a new term that does not bear the connotation of something physiologically determined, as “intermodality” or “synaesthesia” do due to their use in recent neuropsychology.

9. Conclusions: Divine Bodies Take Shape

My argument in this article takes three steps. The first part, its premise, is well established in the study of Hindu religions: Hindu deities are bodily beings, in the stories told and written about them as well as in the rituals wherein they become manifest so that humans can approach them in this world, the world of mortals (Hi. *Mṛtyulok*). Hindu deities take shape through imaginative practices of telling, performing, depicting and embodying stories. It would be misleading to reduce a much broader field of practices and cultural attitudes to the question of belief, to propositional contents, and to acts of cognition.

I then take a second argumentative step onto the slippery ground of generalisations: We could study divine embodiments as instances of conceptual blending, as the “mapping” of one mental realm onto the other—for instance, to speak about divine energy or presence as “heat”. Such are the “metaphors we live by” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980), because we can only speak about abstract themes such as “energy”, the mind, or social entities by using words from another realm closer at hands: for instance, exactly these said invisible “hands” by which we try to “grasp” the world. While this way of explaining religious imaginings is well established in the cognitive sciences, some possible implications can be rightly disregarded as reducing whole life worlds of people to manifestations of universal cognitive mechanisms, mere projections of the brain. This implication is, however, not inevitable: such projections are, in conceptual metaphor theory, not disregarded as “mere” metaphor or “just” an illusion, but appreciated as the metaphors and illusions we need to get hold of the world at all. This is not fundamentally different from what I was told by Brahmin priests in Uttarakhand, who told me that all mythical stories are true in the sense that they provide us with an imagination (Hi. *kalpanā*) to grasp something ultimately out of our intellectual reach.

Engaging with religious teachings as well as with theories of cognitive psychology both bear similar risks of subsuming ethnographic and philological materials under one general truth. As appealing and convincing such universal mechanisms of how the human mind works might be, I still believe that the study of religion does not find its “solid” ground in “hard” facts. Instead, for doing research and teaching about religion we need to go

beyond universalisms by becoming familiar with subjective experiences of the worlds we study, the worlds shared by human and nonhuman beings, regardless of how real or imaginary they might be. A purely neurophysiological explanation does not teach us how it feels to live in such a world, together with goddesses, gods and ghosts. It therefore has a limited value for making sense of the various stories and practices concerning a goddess or god who is Fever (part 3 of this article), a burning poison emerging from processes of transformation both in the universe and within the body (part 4), the anger of Hindu Gods in the Sanskrit myths of the *Mahābhārata* and of various *Purānas* (part 5), the painfully feverish love for Kālī or Kṛṣṇa in *bhakti* traditions (part 6), or the taste, touch and sight of *ujjvala*, the “blazing up” *rasa* or essence of erotic love (also *śṛṅgāra*; part 7).

I propose a new term, “aesthetic blend”, to take a step into a new direction, into a study of the blending of different sensual qualities and emotions as a matter of “feeling” rather than of “mapping” the world. This allows us to speak about blended sensual qualities of experience and of blended identities without presupposing that this blending is a purely mental, computer-like operation of data processing. This should not mean to ignore the insights of conceptual metaphor theory and cognitive science about the processes of “mapping” and “blending” humans depend on to make sense of their world, and themselves. However, long-term ethnographic studies and philological engagement with narrations, genres, texts and contexts should aim at enriching the typical metaphors appearing and reappearing in religious thought and practice with qualities of experience, with the culturally specific aesthetic styles, emotional habits and with subjective feelings. Strong tools for doing so without falling back into speculations about how it feels to encounter “the holy” have been developed in the *Aesthetics of Religion* research network. Aesthetics, as understood in this network, encompass the bodily, sensual conditions for acculturation, learning and social construction as well as the socially shaped and culturally conditioned nature of sensual perception. The “fire of revenge”, which amalgamates an angry human woman with the fierce Goddess Jagdāmbikā herself, the “Mother of the World”, is an aesthetic blend. This term leaves open the possibility that Hindus not only think of the divine presence as heat, but, more fundamentally, “feel” it—both in the bodily and the emotional sense.

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Notes

- ¹ Cf., for instance, Lilith Apostel’s work on how Egyptians and Mesopotamians of the second millennium BC came to terms with death “by equating death with sleep: beds and other sleeping equipment are a common grave good, and ritual and literary texts regularly mention a netherworld that coincides with the world of dreams”. While I find the cognitive, emotional and aesthetic blending of death, “lower” worlds and sleep extremely interesting, I am still not sure how far I can follow Apostel’s claim that “the underlying mental structures facilitating such beliefs are universal and reach far beyond the obvious similarity between sleep and death, i.e., the outward unresponsiveness of body and mind. Rather, the simulated world that is experienced in dreams is not random but possesses certain characteristics, and Mesopotamian and Egyptian beliefs about the netherworld can be related to universal human experience, such as the feeling of downward movement while falling asleep” (Apostel 2018).
- ² I do not use words such as “imagination”, “metaphor” or “myths” as other words for “mere illusion”, or for a “made up reality”. The *Aesthetic of Religion* research network has, in several volumes, appreciated and theorized imagination as a capacity for enhanced, multisensory experience (Traut and Wahl 2020). Even though the word “imagination” means “making images”, it is not refined to visual perception.
- ³ I documented the making of this rope in an ethnographic film, *Weaving a Space*, which is available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FYFhawKXO8&list=PLojnLIM5imPhu_XN5B_pN-0wO0J2J3qs&index=12&t=380s, accessed on 20 October 2022.

- 4 This story is known all over South Asia, but a Garhwali version calls both Kṛṣṇa and Kāliya “King of Serpents” (Nāgarāj), and both are capable to afflict a whole region with an illness connected to serpents, a nāgdoṣ (Jassal 2020, p. 111f.). Both Sanskrit terms, *kṛṣṇa* and *kāliya*, mean “the dark one”.
- 5 “Donkeys were expendable and used until their last breath [. . .]. Asses are prone to contracting a number of diseases [. . .], whose symptoms cause visible ulcerations and/or deformations of the epidermis [. . .]. The combination of this with the bellicose nature of the wild ass, its strength and its insatiable sexual appetite have contributed to identifying this creature with some of the most dreaded diseases (smallpox), and to assigning it to a goddess capable of healing.” (Ferrari 2013, p. 249).
- 6 Mādhava, “the one who is sweet as honey”, is one of Kṛṣṇa’s most well known names. Many mass-produced posters and other images of Kṛṣṇa depict him as a blue baby eating sweet things or stealing butter. Such images are meant to be “sweet” in the sense of cute, to trigger *vātsalya rati*, motherly love, in the devotees (Pasche Guignard 2016).
- 7 “According to my informants, Śītalā is not to be identified with disease, as the label ‘smallpox goddess’ seems to imply. Smallpox, measles and fevers exist independently, and they are already inside our body—though inactive. Śītalā simply controls them [and] is rarely said to be an infecting presence. The conditions of illness are explained by locals in terms of weight (*bhar*) and/or heat (*tapas*)” (Ferrari 2010, p. 146).
- 8 “During my fieldwork in Tamilnadu, when I asked about the ‘source’ of poxes, [. . .] Velmurugan, a singer, who plays utukkai (hour-glass shaped drum) at Mariyamman festivals, from Ulundurpet responded: ‘Ammāi is inside the body. From inside it comes out on the body as pustules that can be seen with our naked eyes’. To the same question, Kala, a devotee of Mariyamman, who resides in Vannanthurai, Besant Nagar, later explained: ‘Ammāi comes from inside us.’ In reply to my follow-up question, ‘What is inside?’ to her, she further explained: ‘Akka, ammaī dwells in the stomach and it arrives from there’” (Srinivasan 2019, p. 6).
- 9 The idea of being “hangry”, angry or impatient due to being hungry, is perhaps less a culturally specific idea than a generally human tendency or somato-psychological experience, which might be suppressed, channeled or lived out differently in different cultures, promoting different emotional styles. I thank Alina Depner for making me familiar with this concept (on an intellectual, not on an experiential level).
- 10 “The categories of hot and cold are at once psychic and somatic, material and mental, as well as sociological, geographic, gastronomic, cosmological, aesthetic, medical—I could extend this list considerably. An interpretation of Kumaoni idioms for describing emotional life thus cannot be restricted to this domain but requires opening up a wider realm of expressions and meanings. Kumaoni ethnopsychology cannot be detached from Kumaoni ethnosociology—since different castes are assumed to have different emotional make-ups—or from Kumaoni calendrics—since the seasons participate in hot and cold—or, to offer another example, from Kumaoni ethno-ornithology—since a number of birdsongs signify and evoke emotion” (Leavitt 1996, p. 522).
- 11 In Tamil, the term for madness is *pittam*, the Sanskrit word for bile (Daniel 1984, p. 91). Bile (*pittam*), wind (*vāyu*) and phlegm (*kapa*) represent hot, even-tempered and cold states of body and psyche—ideas probably influenced by Greek Humoral Pathology, which is still present in India as the *Unani* strand of medicine.
- 12 In a story from Paḷavūr in Tamil Nadu, a Brahman sorcerer tames the dangerous or “hot” goddess Icakki by driving a wooden peg into her head. When his wife innocently pulls it out, “Icakki explodes and emerges in her active, raged form and kills the pregnant woman. She plucks out the baby, and crushes it in her teeth. She garlands herself with the intestines of the woman and makes the *kuravai* sound (a cultural specific expression made by flapping the tongue against the palate)” (Schuler 2012, p. 5).
- 13 “In post-Vedic mythology and even in a few of the latest hymns of the RV [. . .] *soma* is identified with the moon [as the receptacle of the other beverage of the gods called Amṛita, or as the lord of plants, cf. *indu, oṣadi-pati*]” (Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, entry on *soma*).
- 14 “Snakes (often symbolizing women) perform an alchemy in which milk is transmuted into poison [. . .]. A yogi can also drink poison and turn it into seed, and he can turn his own seed into Soma by activating the (poisonous?) coiled serpent goddess, Kuṇḍalinī” (Doniger 1982, p. S. 54).
- 15 The dualism of heat and cold is not as simple in the story as I have drawn it here: The cooling milk does not plainly evolve into amṛta, whose power to cool is higher, but the essence of milk is first concentrated in butter fat: “From the milk came forth ghee” (*kṣirād abhūd ghytam; Mahābhārata* 1.16.27). When eating with Indian friends, in the Himalaya as well as in Germany, they often told me, sometimes warned me, that ghee is very energetic and hot. Perhaps, even the power to cool is, as a power or energy, conceived as heat? This confusing thought, as close as it might come to how a refrigerator works, is too incoherent to pursue it further.
- 16 My translation from *Chāndogyaopaniṣad* 6.6.1-4: *dadhnaḥ somya mathyamānasya yo ’nimā sa ūrdhvaḥ samudīṣati / tat sarpir bhavati // 1 // evam eva khalu somyānnasyāśyamānasya yo ’nimā sa ūrdhvaḥ samudīṣati / tan mano bhavati // 2 // apāṃ somya pīyamānānām yo ’nimā sa ūrdhvaḥ samudīṣati / sā prāno bhavati // 3 // tejasah somyāśyamānasya yo ’nimā sa ūrdhvaḥ samudīṣati / sā vāg bhavati // 4 //*
- 17 My translation from *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* 5.9.1: *ayam agnir vaiśvānaro yo ’yam antaḥ puruṣe | yenedam annaṃ pacyate / yad idam adyate / tasyaiṣa ghoṣo bhavati / yam etat karṇāv apidhāya śṛṇoti / sa yadotkramiṣyan bhavati nainam ghoṣaṃ śṛṇoti.*
- 18 In Sanskrit literatures, “heat” (*tapas, tejas*) can refer to “pain”, to “distress”, to “suffering” in general, or to religious austerities and to the power thereby gained. It can both mean “erotic” passion (*kāma*) and its “ascetic” restriction.

- 19 My translation from *Mahābhārata* 12.273.3 & 6: *taskya vaktrāt sudāruṇa niṣpapātā mahāghorā smṛthi . . . ulkāś ca jvalitās tasya dīptāḥ parśve prapedire [. . .] // vyajṛmbhata [. . .] tīrajavarasamanvita.*
- 20 “In der leidenschaftlich-hingebungsvollen, ekstatisch-affirmativen bhakti (Tamil: patti), wie sie erstmals in den Hymnen der tamilischen Dichter-Heiligen des 6./7. Jh.n.Chr. überliefert ist, will man die Gottheit schmecken, sie in sich hineinnehmen, ihre Süße kosten, mit ihr seelisch und körperlich verschmelzen, von ihr regelrecht besessen werden und wie ein Gourmet ihren Namen zerkauen, auf der Zunge zergehen lassen, sie in sich einverleiben und verdauen” (Wilke 2003, p. 19).
- 21 The *Harivaṁśa*, an appendix of the *Mahābhārata* dated back to the 1st to 4th ct. C.E., gives the first account on how the Gopīs, the cowgirls of the Braj regions, dance and amuse themselves with Kṛṣṇa in the erotic Rās Līla dance: “In this night, the lovely cowherder girls drank his lovely face with their eyes thrown at him, as though it was the moon turned into milk” (my translation from *Harivaṁśa* 63.19: *tās tasya vadanaṁ kāntaṁ kāntā gopastriyo niśi/pibanti nayanākṣepair gāṁ gatam śaśinaṁ yathā*. Instead of “turned into milk”, *gām gata* could also be translated as “gone to the cow”, i.e., Earth—meaning that the celestial body has come down to join the human worshippers on their earthly plane of existence.
- 22 “Music, expressed in *rāgas* or melody models, is thought to color (*rakti, rañjana*) the mind, to bring about emotions quite naturally in a transpersonal manner. Emotions, aesthetic sentiments (*rasa*), and atmospheric moods are conveyed and triggered not only by the lyrics and rhetoric of the narrative, but foremost by sensing the audible text. Adding a temporal dimension, *rāgas* (perceived as sonic personalities) are also related to specific times of the day” (Wilke 2020, p. 112).
- 23 Hawley cites another translation of this line, *manu hamāro bāndhiuu māiī kaval nain āpne*, as “My body is bound tight, Mother, in the ropes of the Lotus-eyed one” (Hawley 2005, p. 104). By choosing another option, he does not dismiss the other one: “This ‘binding’: is it a chain or a bandage? Of what does it consist? Is it *guna* (i.e., *guṇa*) in the sense of the strands of a rope or is it *guna* in a rueful joking reference to Krishna’s virtues or qualities, the powers that make him what he is? Nancy Martin translated by taking the first road, and I chose the second ” (ibid., p. 105).
- 24 My translation from *Mahābhārata* 2.71.18: *rudatī muktakeśī rajasvalā śoṇitāktārdravasanā.*
- 25 “The elderly, maternal Kunti is associated with motherhood, sexual modesty, nurturance, and especially virtue, while the dangerous and sexually active Draupadi is explicitly identified as Kali and sometimes the recipient of dramatic blood-sacrifices. Daughter-in-law and mother-in-law embody both sides of the distinction between the fierce, bloodthirsty goddess and sexually active female, on the one hand, and the benevolent, vegetarian goddess and nurturing, nonsexual mother, on the other” (Sax 2002, p. 135).
- 26 My translation from *Sāṁkhyākārikā* 13: *sattvaṁ laghu prakāśakam iṣṭam upaṣṭambhakaṁ calaṁ ca rajaḥ/guru varaṇakam eva tamaḥ pradīpavac cārthato vṛttiḥ*. Gauḍapāda’s commentary explains that “where *sattvaṁ* prevails, the limbs are light, the intellect is enlightened, the senses are clear/bright/pure” (*yaḍā sattvamutkaṭaṁ bhavati tadā laghūnyaṅāni buddhiprakāśaśca prasannatendriyāṅāṁ bhavati*). On the other hand, “where *tama* becomes excessive, the limbs become heavy, the senses are obscured and unable to function” (*yaḍā tama utkaṭaṁ bhavati tadā gurūnyaṅānyāvṛtānīndriyāṅi bhavanti svārthāsamarthāni*), while “the effect of *rajas* is a capricious or versatile mind” (*rajovṛttis calacitta*), which brings forth “excessive excitement” (*utkaṭam upaṣṭambham*), like that of a bull.
- 27 Nowadays, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* are commonly depicted as white, red and black in color.
- 28 My translation from *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 1.5.41–42: *rajomātrātmikām eva tato ‘nyāṁ jagṛhe tanum/tataḥ kṣud brahmaṇo jātā jajñe kopas tayā tataḥ // kṣutkṣāmān andhakāre ‘tha so ‘srjad bhagavān prabhuḥ/virūpāḥ śmaśrulā jātās te ‘bhyadhāvanta taṁ prabhum.*
- 29 My translation from *Nāṭyaśāstra* 7.7: *yo artho hṛdayasaṁvādī tasya bhāvo rasodbhavaḥ/śarīraṁ vyāpyate tena śuṣkaṁ kāṣṭham iva agninā* (G. L.).
- 30 Akkadologist Ulrike Steinert suggests that even the ancient “Mesopotamians linked burning abdominal pain and anger with an increase or overproduction of bile (*zē, martu*) in the body, the latter of which was likewise associated with fire, heat and burning” (Steinert 2020, p. 450). Also the Latin verb *ūrere*, “to burn, to inflame”, works as a metaphor for love or passion.
- 31 “Intermodality includes cross-modal evaluations such as hearing specific sounds related to a specific body movement towards the source of the sound and, by this action, establishing a temporal sequence and improving orientation in a given surrounding. Like this, intero- and exteroceptive sensory systems are interdependent with emotionality” (Koch 2020, p. 28).
- 32 Nevertheless, “synaesthetes have specific concurrents (e.g., a certain shade of green for the piano note middle C) while a non-synaesthete has no single colour in mind (even if he or she prefers lighter colours for higher pitches)” (Simner 2019, p. 107). An attempt to explain this difference is the Neonatal Synaesthesia Hypothesis, based on “evidence that babies have greater interplay between the senses” (ibid., p. 103). According to this hypothesis, “all human infants are born as synaesthetes with hyper-connected brains” (ibid., p. 102), but most people lose that ability or condition due to “synapting pruning”, the slow dying off of the enormous numbers of connections in the brain.
- 33 One might add the German use of the Latin terms for “hard” and “soft”, *durus* and *mollis*, for major and minor, or the perception of a dissonant note as “sour” (thanks to Lisberth Riddersmann for making me familiar with this concept).
- 34 As Kövecses suggests, a reemergence of humoral pathology in England around 1400 stimulated the conceptualization of anger as “hot”—after “a long decline [of heat as] a major component in the concept of anger” (Kövecses 2008, p. 394).

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