CHAPTER 4

INDIA: THE DANCE OF SHIVA

Sex may drive the soap operas in America. But in India, what really moves the dishwashing liquids are serials based on ancient myths of Indian gods.

India is a country bursting with diversity—virtually every writer describes it as one of the most culturally and geographically diverse nations in existence. India is the second-largest country in the world with a population of 1 billion (after China, with 1.3 billion residents); it is about one third the size of the United States. India is the world’s most populous democracy. It became a modern nation only in 1947 after the British ceded control. At the same time neighboring Pakistan was also created. India is a poor nation, but on many measures it has achieved substantial success since 1947. Life expectancy has increased from 32 to 62 years and adult literacy from 14% to 53.5%. While GNP per person has increased in recent years, it is still only $440, compared to $29,240 in the United States and $740 in China. This nation also has the largest number of college-educated scientists and computer specialists in the world and a middle class that is estimated to include 100 to 150 million people, although 53% of the population live on less than $1 per day. India has surpassed Pakistan on most measures of economic and social success, but its success is limited when compared to that of China. A major reason for India’s limited success is its dramatic increase in population without corresponding growth in resources; one third of the population is under 15 years of age.

In 1991 The Economist published an influential “Survey of India”; a picture of a caged tiger was on the cover, with the title “caged” (Crook, 1991). The basic message was that India was too bureaucratic and centralized. Manmohan Singh, India’s finance minister at the time, and others were influenced by this negative depiction
and began efforts to privatize the economy. These efforts are continuing but are retarded by infighting among political parties and interest groups.

Religious diversity is a major feature of India, and it is fitting that our image of, and cultural metaphor for, this country should be based on religion. As Swami Vivekananda so succinctly stated, “Each nation has a theme in life. In India religious life forms the central theme, the keynote of the whole music of the nation.”

For 2,000 years of its history, India was almost completely Hindu, but for the last millennium or more, Indian culture has been a synthesis of different racial, religious, and linguistic influences. Hinduism itself has undergone many changes owing to the impact of other faiths. It is, therefore, incorrect to contend that Indian culture is solely Hindu culture. However, to begin to understand India, we must start with Hindu traditions. The overwhelming majority of Indians are still tradition oriented, and changes in their culture and society cannot be understood without reference to that tradition.

There are numerous deities or gods in the Hindu religion, each being a different manifestation of one supreme being. The most important gods are Brahma (the Creator), Vishnu (the Preserver), and Shiva (the Destroyer). Among the greatest names and appearances of Shiva is Nataraja, Lord of the Dancers. The Dance of Shiva has been described as the “clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of” (Coomaraswamy, 1924/1969, p. 56), and it also reflects the cyclical nature of Hindu philosophy. Through this metaphor we will begin to explore Indian culture and society.

Among Hindus dancing is regarded as the most ancient and important of the arts. Legend even attributes the creation of the world to dance: Brahma's three steps created earth, space, and sky. Every aspect of nature—man, bird, beast, insect, trees, wind, waves, stars—displays a dance pattern, collectively called the Daily Dance (dainic nrtya). But nature is inert and cannot dance until Shiva wills it; he holds the sacred drum, the damaru, whose soundings set the rhythms that beat throughout the universe. Shiva is like a master conductor and the Daily Dance is the response of all creation to his rhythmic force.

Shiva is seen as the first dancer, a deity who dances simply as an expression of his exuberant personality (Banerji, 1983, p. 43). His dance cannot be performed by anyone else, as Shiva dances out the creation and existence of the world. However, just as the mortal dancer gets tired, so too Shiva periodically lapses into inactivity. The cosmos becomes chaos, and destruction follows the period of creation. This concept of the Dance of Shiva is innate in Eastern ideas of movement and history; it is continuous and both constructive and destructive at the same time (Gopal & Dadachanji, 1951).

In January 2003, my wife and I took a car trip from New Delhi to Agar to see the Taj Mahal and Red Fort. Leaving at 6:30 a.m., we saw incredible diversity along this main highway, with two lanes in each direction. The poor were huddled by fires alongside the highway; there were no sidewalks, so people walked on the highway, as did animals of all types, including monkeys, water buffalos, cows, and so on. There was even a caravan of camels. Under these conditions travel was very slow, averaging 15 to 20 miles an hour, and many vans and cars had a sign, “honk your horn when passing,” which resulted in a constant din. All of these discomforts disappeared when we saw the magnificent Taj Mahal. This experience, repeated several times in other parts of India in one form or another, confirmed that the choice of the Dance of Shiva was appropriate for understanding India.
The Dance of Shiva represents both the conception of world processes as a supreme being’s pastime or amusement (lila) and the very nature of that blessed being, which is beyond the realm of purpose or understanding (Coomaraswamy, 1924/1969). The dance symbolizes the five main activities of the supreme being: creation and development (srishti); preservation and support (sthiti); change and destruction (samhara); shrouding, symbolism, illusion, and giving rest (tirobhava); and release, salvation, and grace (anugraha).

Considered separately, these are the activities of the deities Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Mahesvara, and Sadavisa, respectively. Taken together, the cycle of activity illustrated by the Dance of Shiva encapsulates Hinduism as the main driving force of Indian society. The idea of cycles is a common thread in traditional Indian philosophy and is the theme that will run through our discussion of its culture.

Two distinctive variants of basic Indian culture spring from the people’s Dravidian and Aryan ethnic origins. The Dravidians probably came to India from the eastern Mediterranean coast, forming the highly developed Indus Valley civilization 3,000 years before Christ. About 1500 B.C. this civilization fell into decline, and its people migrated to the southern part of the Indian subcontinent. At about the same time Aryans arrived in India from Persia, settling almost all of the Indo-Gangetic Plain. Today 72% of the population is of Aryan origin, while Dravidians account for 25%. The remaining 3% is made up of a myriad of other groups including Mongoloids.

India’s most populous cities, all ranking among the 40 largest in the world, are Bombay (18 million) to the west, Calcutta (13 million) to the east, Delhi (12 million) to the north, and Madras (5 million) and Bangalore (5 million) to the south.

Religion and language separate the people far more than ethnic background or geography. Although 83% of the Indian population is Hindu, sizable numbers belong to other religious groups: Muslim (11%), Christian (3%), Sikh (2%), Buddhist, Jain, and aboriginal animist. Hindus live throughout India, with smaller concentrations at the southern, northeastern, and northwestern extremities. The minority populations (the term is relative, as Muslims alone number 140 million, the third-largest concentration of Muslims after Indonesia and Pakistan) actively resist being dissolved into a Hindu melting pot. Muslims are in the majority in Kashmir, and Sikhs are concentrated in Punjab.

The four major religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism—are all associated with specific languages in which their original scripts were written: Sanskrit, Arabic, Latin, and Gurumukhi, respectively. The first three are not spoken languages in India, and the fourth in a modernized form is a state language of Punjab. In addition to Arabic, the Muslims in India evolved a language of their own, Urdu, and a number of other regional languages. There are at least 300 known languages in India, 24 of which have at least 1 million speakers each.

After India’s independence from Britain in 1947, Hindi, a north Indian language, was proclaimed the national language. Hindi was spoken at that time by only about 25% of the people, but it was the single most prevalent language in the country. The south had virtually no Hindi speakers, and the southern people opposed starting the process of learning an “alien” language. As a result of these objections, the original constitution recognized no fewer than 15 official languages (3 more were added in 1992), and English was designated an “additional official language” as a compromise. Even today, Hindi is the native tongue of less than half of all Indians, and English is often the language of national communication; it is spoken throughout the country.
India’s history reflects the cycles of chaos and harmony epitomized by the Dance of Shiva. Time after time India has recovered from episodes that would have ended the existence of any other nation. In fact, Shiva’s son, Ganesh, is the symbol of good arising from adversity. According to the legend, Parvati, the consort of Shiva, would spend hours bathing, dressing, and adorning herself. This often meant that Shiva was kept waiting, so Parvati set their son, Ganesh, on guard to prevent Shiva from bursting in on her unannounced and catching her in a state of unreadiness. One day Shiva was so frustrated by Ganesh’s actions that he cut off the child’s head. Distraught, Parvati completely withdrew from her lord, and Shiva realized he would have to restore the child to her if he was to win her back. He resolved to use the first available head he could find, which happened to be that of a baby elephant. The boy regained his life and now had the added advantage of the elephant’s wisdom. Similarly, India’s past and present contributions to art, science, and the spiritual world are immense, despite periods of turmoil and apparent anarchy.

The estrangement of north and south India, illustrated by the debate over language, has historical roots that reach far into the past. The south has enjoyed calm and relative tranquility throughout most of its history, whereas the north has been subjected to a series of foreign invasions, often on a grand scale. Consequently, the northern culture is more a product of a mixed heritage. Among the most significant modifying influences in the north were the various Muslim invasions, beginning about 1000 A.D. As a result of these invasions, the administrative structure of northern India was repeatedly destroyed, society often deprived of leadership, and religious faith shaken.

Muslim rule of north India began early in the 13th century and lasted until the middle of the 19th century. Muslim rulers were harsh on Hindus. It is against Muslim beliefs to worship any idol or image of God, so the invaders destroyed many thousands of Hindu temples and replaced them with mosques. A discriminatory tax was imposed on non-Islamic subjects, and Hindus were given low-level positions if they were employed at all. Forceful conversion of Hindus to the Islamic faith was widely carried out. Hindus were turned into second-class citizens in their own land and never shown the beautiful side of Islam. The confrontation between two virtually incompatible religious systems led to implacable mutual hatred between their respective followers. The echoes of this conflict resound even today. For instance, in 1992 more than 200,000 Hindus stormed and destroyed a 450-year-old Muslim mosque erected by the Mughals to replace a Hindu temple on the site that marks the birthplace of the Hindu god, Rama, and hundreds of people were killed in the ensuing bedlam. Such instances are relatively common. This wave of killing was repeated in 2002 when a Hindu religious group attempted to build a temple on this site.

Unlike the north, southern India enjoyed a stable, almost uninterrupted regime of Hindu kingdoms until 1646, when the Muslims succeeded in conquering and unifying all India. The Muslim Mughal empire began to disintegrate during the 18th century, with independent regional kingdoms springing up everywhere. The influence of the British East India Company rose as Britain ousted rival Western colonial powers in the south. During those days of weakness plundering invaders came from Persia and Afghanistan. North India entered a state of anarchy from which it did not emerge until the British gradually extended their control, leading to the establishment of the British Raj (Rule) in the 19th century.

The British government instituted direct rule over India in 1858 following the Sepoy (Indian) mutiny. Many Indians think of this event as the first war of
independence. The Sepoys, Indian soldiers in British employ, mutinied over a rumor that animal fat was being used in the cartridges they had to bite to load their rifles. Hindus heard it was beef fat, while Muslims heard it was pig fat, thereby violating the taboos of both. British troops barely put down the insurrection; the British garrison at Kanpur, with its women and children, was slaughtered, and Kanpur became a rallying cry for British vengeance (Arden, 1990, p. 133).

Early expressions of nationalism first crystallized in the Indian National Congress in 1885 and the All-India Muslim League in 1906. Following the infamous massacre of more than 400 unarmed demonstrators at Amritsar by General Dyer’s troops in 1919, Indian leaders put aside their previous faith and hope in the good intentions of the British Empire. Inspired by M. K. Gandhi, the Indian National Congress began a program of peaceful noncooperation (satyagraha) with British rule. Tragically, just months after India’s independence was finally granted, Mahatma (Great Soul) Gandhi was killed by a Hindu extremist who had denounced him as an appeaser of the Muslims.

The British granted independence in 1947, but the country was partitioned into a largely Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan. Overnight partition created great communal strife, and 12 million refugees moved across the new India-Pakistan border from 1946 to 1947, Hindus into India and Muslims into Pakistan. More than 200,000 people were killed in the accompanying riots, giving the world a lasting image of a modern India seemingly at war with itself. In fact, except for times of crisis, India has managed to accommodate and contain the destructive forces latent in group differences. But it is also true that today the political and social compromises that have permitted the country to deal with its diversity are under extreme pressure.

As India’s central authorities have faced threats of secession, caste warfare, and sectarian violence, they have sometimes adopted stern measures. The army has been called on more frequently to restore order to the country’s troubled provinces than to defend the country from external threats.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the head of the Congress party, became the first prime minister of India in 1947. He was unwaveringly loyal to the basic concepts of freedom, democracy, socialism, world peace, and international cooperation and emerged as an eloquent statesman for the world’s nonaligned, less developed nations. Two years after Nehru’s death in 1964, his daughter, Indira Gandhi (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi), succeeded to her father’s office. Mrs. Gandhi struggled to modernize India and make it an economic power, but she may have lacked her father’s devotion to “the spirit of man.” She invoked the emergency provisions of the constitution in 1975 and suspended civil liberties, citing the need to address some of the nation’s persistent problems “on a war footing.” When elections were called in 1977, the Indian people expressed their resentment against the methods of “the Emergency” and voted Gandhi out of office. After full democracy was restored, an apparently chastened Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1979, where she remained until she was assassinated 5 years later.

Rajiv Gandhi, Indira’s son, became prime minister on her death but amid claims of widespread corruption in the government, his Congress (I) Party lost a general election. The succeeding government was short-lived, unable to sustain a parliamentary majority for their policies. During the next campaign Rajiv Gandhi was also assassinated, and the Congress (I) Party was swept back to power on a huge sympathy vote.

It appears that the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, which has dominated India’s modern political system, is now at an end, or at least suspended. The family’s journey—their
sequence of evolution, power, death, return, creation, destruction, and, perhaps, ultimate salvation—epitomizes the actions of the Dance of Shiva and the cyclical nature of Hindu philosophy.

Currently, India really has no dominant political party. The BJP Party, a conservative Hindu-centric party, has risen in stature and has won major elections; the Congress Party is regrouping and is still very powerful; and there are several other parties contending for power.

Cyclical Hindu Philosophy

The Indian perspective on life tends to differ most sharply from that of Europe and the United States in the value that it accords to the discipline of philosophy (Coomaraswamy, 1924/1969, p. 2). In Europe and America the study of philosophy tends to be regarded as an end in itself—some kind of mental gymnastics—and as such it seems of little importance to the ordinary man or woman. In India philosophy tends to overlap with religion, and it is regarded as the key to life itself, clarifying its essential meaning and the way to attain spiritual goals. Elsewhere philosophy and religion pursued distinct and different paths, which may have crossed but never merged (Munshi, 1965, p. 133). In India it is not always possible to differentiate between the two.

In Hindu philosophy, the world is considered illusory, like a dream, the result of God's lila (amusement). According to one interpretation, Bharata Varsha, the ancient name of India, literally means "land of the actors" (Lannoy, 1971, p. 286). In an illusionary world, people cannot achieve true happiness through the mere physical enjoyment of wealth or material possessions. The only happiness worth seeking is permanent spiritual happiness as distinguished from these fleeting pleasures. Absolute happiness can result only from liberation from worldly involvement through spiritual enlightenment. Life is a journey in search of mukti (salvation), and the seeker, if he or she withstands all the perils of the road, is rewarded by exultation beyond human experience or perception (moksha). In the same way that the Dance of Shiva leads the cosmos through a journey, Hindu philosophy directs each individual along a path.

There are basically four paths or ways that lead to the ideal state: intense devotion or love of God (bhakti yoga), selfless work or service (karma yoga), philosophy or knowledge of self (jnana yoga), and meditation or psychological exercise (raja yoga). The four ways are not exclusive, and people may choose among or combine them according to the dictates of temperament and circumstance. Whatever path is followed, every Hindu is aware of the difficulty of reaching the ideal state in a single lifetime. This is the point at which the concept of reincarnation, or the cycle of lives, becomes important.

Individual souls (jivas) enter the world mysteriously; by God's power, certainly, but how and for what purpose is not fully explainable (Smith, 1958, p. 100). Jivas begin as the souls of the simplest forms of life, but they do not vanish with the death of their original bodies. Rather, they simply move to a new body or form. The transmigration of souls takes an individual jiva through a series of complex bodies until a human one is achieved. At this point the ascent of physical forms ends, and the soul begins its path to mukti. This gives an abiding sense of purpose to the Hindu life, a God to be actively sought and patiently awaited through the cycles of many lives.
The doctrine of reincarnation corresponds to a fact that everyone may have noticed: the varying age of the souls of people, irrespective of the age of the body. Some people remain irresponsible, self-assertive, uncontrolled, and inept to their last days; others are serious, friendly, self-controlled, and talented from their youth onward. According to Hindu philosophy, each person comes equipped with a highly personalized unconscious, characterized by a particular mix of three fundamental qualities: *sattva* (clarity, light), *rajas* (passion, desire), and *tamas* (dullness, darkness). Their relative strength differs from one person to another but, in the Hindu idea of destiny, the unconscious has an innate tendency to strive toward clarity and light (Kakar, 1978).

The birth of a person into a particular niche in life and the relative mix of the three fundamental qualities in an individual are determined by the balance of the right and wrong actions of his or her soul through its previous cycles. The rate of progress of the soul through this endless cycle of birth, life, and death—the soul’s karma—depends on the deeds and decisions made in each lifetime. One way of mapping the probable karma of an individual is to consult astrological charts at the time of his or her birth, and this is an important tradition in Indian society.

The Dance of Shiva portrays the world’s endless cycle of creation, existence, destruction, and re-creation, and Hindu philosophy depicts the endless cycle of the soul through birth, life, death, and reincarnation. We will now turn to examining the cycle of individual life within that greater series of lifetimes.

### The Cycle of Life

According to Hindu philosophy a person passes through four stages of life, the first of which is that of a student. The prime responsibility in life during this stage is to learn. Besides knowledge, the student is supposed to develop a strong character and good habits and emerge equipped to produce a good and effective life.

The second stage, beginning with marriage, is that of a householder. During this stage, human energy turns outward and is expressed on three fronts: family, vocation, and community. The needs of pleasure are satisfied through the family, needs of duty through exercising the social responsibilities of citizenship, and the needs of success through employment.

The third stage of life is retirement, signifying withdrawal from social obligations. This is the time for people to begin their true education: to discover who they are and what life is all about. It is a time to read, think, ponder over life’s meaning, and discover and live by a philosophy. At this stage people need to transcend the senses and dwell in harmony with the timeless reality that underlies the dream of life in this natural world.

The Hindu concept of retirement is exemplified in a story told by a traveler in India (Arden, 1990, p. 132). The traveler saw a white-bearded man seated on a blanket, writing in a notebook. The man looked up and smiled as the traveler walked past. “Are you a Buddhist?” the traveler asked, to which the man shook his head. “A Hindu? A Muslim?” Again, he shook his head and replied “Does it matter? I am a man.” The traveler asked what the man was writing. “The truth,” he said, “only the truth.”

The final stage is one of *sannyasin*, defined by the *Bhagavad-Gita* as “one who neither hates nor loves anything.” In this stage people achieve *mukti* (salvation) and are living only because the time to make the final ascent has not come. When
they finally depart from this world, freedom from the cycle of life and death is attained.

People can pass through the four stages of life in a single lifetime or stay at each stage for many lifetimes. Even Buddha is reputed to have passed through several hundred lives. Progress is determined in the light of the activities and inclination of the person at each stage of life. For example, Indian religion is replete with rituals, the primary purpose of which is to receive the blessings of God. Each ceremony involves the singing of religious songs (bhajans) and discourses by priests and other religious persons (satsang). The sincerity with which people indulge in these activities and apply the tenets of the philosophy in their practical life determines their progress through the cycle of life and death. A person may expound philosophy at great length, go to the temple every day, and offer alms to saints and the poor, yet indulge in all sorts of vices. These contradictions in life are resolved on death by karma, which dictates that on reincarnation, each person will receive rewards or punishment for their accumulated good and bad deeds.

The Hindu desire for positive outcomes of daily activities, resulting in positive karma, leads us to a brief discussion of the importance of astrology. With so much at stake almost everyone in India consults the stars, if not on a daily basis, then at least on important occasions. Matching the horoscopes of a bride and groom is as much a part of planning a marriage as choosing the flower arrangements. It is routine for Indians to consult the stars about the best day to close on a house or sign an important contract. When it was revealed that an astrologer helped former President Ronald Reagan's wife, Nancy, set her schedule, Americans hooted with derision. In contrast, no one in India batted an eyelid when India's former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao delayed naming his cabinet because an astrologer warned that the intended day was not auspicious enough.

Like Hindu philosophy, the Indian concept of time is cyclical, characterized by origination, duration, and disappearance ad infinitum. This is reflected in the dramatic structure of a traditional Sanskrit play, typically based on the themes of separation and reunion and tending to end as they begin. Various devices are used—the dream, the trance, the premonition, and the flashback—to disrupt the linearity of time and make the action recoil on itself (Lannoy, 1971, p. 54). Similarly, the Dance of Shiva is a repetitive cycle of creation, existence, and destruction; constant change within a period of time, but ultimately time itself, is irrelevant.

In an attempt to neutralize the anguish of impermanence and change, the carved religious images that every village home possesses are made of permanent materials, such as clay or metal. This also reveals the functional role of the image in a materially restricted environment. The practice of religion at home is one of the main reasons Hinduism was able to survive the invasion of foreign powers over the centuries. Just as religion is important to the family, so, too, the family plays a dominant role in Indian society.

The Family Cycle

Most Indians grow up in an extended family, a form of family organization in which brothers remain together after marriage and bring their wives into their parents' household or compound of homes. Recent migration to cities and towns
in search of economic opportunities has contributed to the weakening of many traditions, including that of extended families. In this section we describe family traditions that exist most strongly in the India of about 500 million people, which continues to be only marginally affected by industrialization. While weakened in some parts of society, many aspects of the family cycle are still important to all.

The preference for a son when a child is born is as old as Indian society. A son guarantees the continuation of the generations, and he will perform the last rites after his parents’ death. This ensures a peaceful departure of the soul to its next existence in the ongoing cycle of life. The word *putra*, son, literally means “he who protects from going to hell.” In contrast, a daughter has negligible ritual significance. She is normally an unmitigated expense, someone who will never contribute to the family income and who on marriage will take away a considerable part of her family’s fortune as her dowry. Although formally abolished, the institution of dowry is still widespread in India, but it is becoming increasingly fashionable among educated Indians not to indulge in the practice.

A striking reflection of this gender preference is the continued masculinization of the Indian population, particularly in the north. There are 107 males to 100 females. The main reasons for this ratio are the higher mortality rate of female children and the tendency to limit family size, once there is a sufficient number of sons. Also, the recent availability of sex determination tests has allowed women to ensure that their first-born is a boy, as they can abort unwanted female children.

Just as the Dance of Shiva represents preservation, caretaking, and support, parents tend to nurture their children with great care. A Hindu child grows up in the security of the extended family and has few contacts with other groups until it is time for school. Although the mother is chiefly responsible for the care of the child, there is also close contact with other females and mother-surrogates, and this continues for much longer than in many other cultures. A child is usually breastfed for at least 2 years (although a significantly shorter time in the case of a female child) and will be fed any time that it cries. Consequently, most infants are virtually never left alone.

The strong ties of home life do not conflict with the Hindu belief in the liberty of the soul removed from worldly concerns. Love of family is not merely a purpose in itself but a way to the final goal of life. Love will not yield the rewards of *mukti* (salvation) when it remains self-centered; that is why the Hindu try to diffuse their love over sons, daughters, guests, and neighbors (Munshi, 1965, p. 115).

Children in India are considered sacred, a manifestation of God, but if the Hindu ideal is a high degree of infant indulgence, reality is somewhat different in the poorer areas of India. Here, there are typically many young children under one roof, and 1 in 10 will die in infancy, so babies are not regarded as extraordinary creatures. Except for the first-born son, children tend to be taken for granted. This is reinforced by the belief in rebirth; as an individual is not born once and once only, he or she cannot be regarded as a unique event. The mother has probably witnessed the birth of several babies and may have seen some die, too. When her child cries, falls sick, or is accidentally hurt, she is not beset with feelings of intense guilt. A mother’s work may be long and hard, both in the home and in the fields, so she is unable to give her child undivided attention.

Even as the Dance of Shiva leads the world through the joys of existence, an element of chaos is inherent in the world’s Daily Dance. Similarly, nature in India has been full of threats to a child’s safety: famine, disease, and chronic civil disorder. As a rule, until modern times more than half of all deaths befell children in their
first year of life. As the nation got a grip on its affairs and as campaigns against diseases such as malaria and smallpox took hold, mortality rates fell. The cultural importance of children is derived from the need to carry on the cycle of life. This continued importance is reflected in statistics showing that while death rates since 1921 have fallen, birth rates have declined much more slowly.

Government attempts to regulate the birth rate have become synonymous with sterilization programs. Resentment against coerced sterilization in India helped defeat Indira Gandhi’s government in 1977. As a result of the political fall-out, birth control was set back as a popular cause. Middle-class Indians, influenced by education and the desire for an improved standard of living, are increasingly adopting family planning methods. However, when the formidable psychic barrier of traditional Hindu beliefs in the life cycle are considered, it seems clear that rapid population growth will continue in the poorer, rural areas.

An Indian father is frequently remote, aloof, and a much feared disciplinary figure, just as Shiva is distant from the world he nurtures, but there are also special bonds between father and son, and the relationship is one of mutual dependence. A son must obey his father unquestioningly, pay him respect, and offer complete support in every need both in life and after death. The father owes his son support, a good education, the best possible marital arrangement, and inheritance of property. One Indian proverb reads, “A son should be treated as a prince for 5 years; as a slave for 10 years; but from his 16th birthday, as a friend.”

Very early in life the son learns that women are lower in status than men. The position of women in this hierarchical society means that they must constantly be making demands and pleading with superiors for one thing or another. The son soon develops an attitude of superiority. A female’s authority can seldom be absolute, except for the unchallengeable position that the senior grandmother may inherit. A son finds out that anger may be productive; violent outbursts of anger are often effective if directed against someone of uncertain status. Similarly the destructive powers of the Dance of Shiva are effective in creating new opportunities and patterns.

The relative position of men and women is clear in Indian society, and the question of competitive equality is not customarily considered. The Hindu marriage emphasizes identity, not equality. Generally, women are thought to have younger souls, and therefore they are nearer to the world than men and inferior to them. Girls are trained to be submissive and docile, to fulfill culturally designated feminine roles. The ideal of womanhood in Indian tradition is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness, self-effacement, self-sacrifice, and singular faithfulness. Throughout history, Indian women have had dual status: As a wife, a woman seduces her husband away from his work and spiritual duties, but as a mother, she is revered.

Among the crosses women have had to bear in Indian society are female infanticide, child marriage, purdah (feminine modesty and seclusion), marital mistreatment, and the low status of widows. Until the mid-19th century, the voluntary immolation of the widow on her husband’s funeral pyre (sati) was not uncommon; the widow believed her act would cleanse her family of the sins of three generations. Poor families are more likely to be fearful of not being able to scrape together enough money to find their daughters husbands and may resort to killing infant girls. Generally speaking, however, the lower down the economic hierarchy, the more equal are the relations between the sexes. Of course, there are many factors that can bring about or alleviate hostile feelings toward women, but women often
view the various forms of mistreatment they suffer as part of their destiny as women. The Dance of Shiva is not destined to lead to joy throughout the world, and if the corresponding experience of humanity includes some unhappiness for women in society, that is simply the way things are.

A man's worth and recognition of his identity are intimately bound up in the reputation of his family. Lifestyle and actions are rarely seen as the product of individual effort but are interpreted in light of family circumstance and reputation in the wider society. Individual identity and merit are enhanced if people have the good fortune to belong to a large, harmonious, and closely-knit family, which helps to safeguard children's upbringing and to advance them in life. The family contributes to decisions that affect an individual's future, maximizes the number of connections necessary to secure a job or other favors, comes to aid in times of crisis, and generally mediates an individual's experience with the outside world. For these reasons the character of the respective families weighs heavily in the consideration of marriage proposals.

Arranged marriage is still the norm in India. Advertisements regularly appear in European and American newspapers for the purpose of identifying potential candidates. The Western concept of romantic love arises from the Western concept of personality and, ultimately, from the un-Indian concept of equality of the sexes. In addition, the concept of life as an illusion makes the idea of a loveless marriage easier to understand.

Marriages are usually for a lifetime, as divorce is considered socially disgraceful. In the case of child marriage, the girl lives at her parent's home until she is about 15 or 16 years of age, after which she moves to the home of her husband's family. A newly arrived daughter-in-law is sometimes subject to varying forms of humiliation until she becomes pregnant. This treatment originated historically from the urgent need to ensure the early birth of a son in times of low life expectancy. Also, the size of the dowry that a girl brings with her can also determine how she is treated or mistreated in her husband's home. The husband's family may keep making demands on her for additional support from her family, and if it is not forthcoming, she may be tortured or even burned alive, although the outcry against such treatment seems to have diminished such illegal practices.

The restricted life of women in the conservative atmosphere of India does not prevent them from developing a strong sense of self-respect. Their ultimate role is to preserve unity and continuity in the chain of life, and there is pride and dignity in their sense of identity with the family and their roles as wife and mother. Indian society seems to have given women, rather than men, resilience and vitality under the difficult circumstances of life in that country. Ultimately, all respond to the Dance of Shiva, and whether that brings great joy or unhappiness to the current life is irrelevant compared to the ongoing search for salvation, or \textit{mukti}.

Since the beginning of time, dancing has been a rite performed by both men and women; Shiva and his wife, Parvati, are often depicted in ancient sculptures as one composite figure, half male and half female. Typical figurines of Shiva are four-armed, with broad masculine shoulders and curving womanly hips. Similarly both genders contribute to Indian society today. In this century, Indian women have undergone a social revolution more far-reaching and radical than that of men. While this process has been going on, women have attained positions of distinction in public and professional life. The political dominance of Indira Gandhi is one example of how women can be held in high esteem by all Indians.
In summary, it can be seen that the extended family unit is still a strong feature of Indian society. Just as the Dance of Shiva wills all nature to respond to its rhythm, so, too, each member of the family fulfills a role dictated by family tradition.

The Cycle of Social Interaction

A sense of duty (dharma) is the social cement in India; it holds the individual and society together. Dharma is a concept that is wider than the Western idea of duty, as it includes the totality of social, ethical, and spiritual harmony (Lannoy, 1971, p. 217). Dharma consists of three categories: universal principles of harmony (sanatana dharma), relative ethical systems varying by social class (varnashrama dharma), and personal moral conduct (svadharma). Among the prime traditional virtues are: generosity and selflessness, truthfulness, restraint from greed, and respect for elders. These principles are consistent with a virtual global idea of righteousness. Hinduism has progressed through India’s moments of crisis by lifting repeatedly the banner of the highest ideals. The image of the Dance of Shiva is strongly evoked by the following passage from the Bhagavad-Gita:

Whenever the dharma decays, and when that which is not dharma prevails, then I manifest myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil, for the firm establishment of the national righteousness, I am born again and again.

The oldest source of ethical ideas is the Mahabharata, or Great Epic (of Bharata), the first version of which appeared between the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. It is a huge composite poem of 90,000 couplets in 18 books, which traces the rivalry between two families involved in an unrelenting war. The story is interrupted by numerous episodes, fables, moral tales, and long political and ethical discourses, all of which serve to illustrate the illusory nature of the world and encourage the reader to strive for God. This sacred book, a repository of Hindu beliefs and customs, is based on the assumption that dharma is paramount in the affairs of society. The epics took at least 1,000 years to compose and are still the most widely read and respected religious books of the Hindus. The most popular and influential part of the epics is the Bhagavad-Gita (Song of the Blessed One), a book Gandhi once said “described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind.”

A recent European traveler in India gave the following illustration of the power of dharma. Sitting precariously among local people on top of a bus during a long journey, a traveler was astounded when a sudden shower of money fell into the dusty road behind them. An Indian alongside the traveler began shouting and pounding on the roof of the bus for the driver to stop. Some way down the road the bus pulled over, and the man rushed away. All the passengers disembarked and waited for the Indian to return, laughing at his comic misfortune and manic disappearance. Eventually the man reappeared, clutching a big handful of notes, including Western money. It was then that the traveler realized his own wallet was gone from his back pocket; it had come loose and blown away from the top of the bus, scattering the equivalent of a year’s income for the average native. The Indian, a total stranger, had run back and convinced the poverty-stricken locals to hand over
the money they were ecstatically gathering from their fields. The traveler began to thank his new friend for his troubles, but with the comment, “It was my duty,” the Indian declined to take any reward. This is a comment that many travelers hear when similar incidents occur.

Hindus generally believe that social conflict, oppression, and unrest do not stem from social organizations but originate in the nonadherence to dharma by those in positions of power. Their actions have created the cycle of disharmony. Hindus see a quarrel as a drama with three actors—two contestants and a peacemaker—and it is not the protagonists but the peacemaker who is seen as the victor in the dispute, as it is he or she who has restored harmony (Lannoy, 1971, p. 198).

Individuals who head institutions are believed to be the sole repositories of the virtues and vices of the institution. Traditionally social reform movements focused not so much on abolishing hierarchical organizations or rejecting the values on which they are based but on removing or changing the individuals holding positions of authority in them (Kakar, 1978). For example, during the declining years of both the Mughal and British Indian empires, the ruling classes enjoyed lives of luxury and extravagance in India. Conspicuous consumption by the aristocratic elites at the expense of the productive classes is with us still in the India of the early 21st century. The identity of the elites may have changed, but their attitude remains.

The issues behind the social and political ferment in India today are not rooted primarily in economic deprivation and frustration, although these make the mix more volatile (Narayana & Kantner, 1992, p. 2). Rather, there is a widespread feeling that the institutions on which the society was founded no longer work.

The tragic recourse to mob violence by religious followers at different times in the country’s history is a contradiction that astounds casual observers of India. How can such terrible things happen in a country where everyone believes in harmony and awaits the ultimate consequences of good and bad deeds in reincarnation? Hindus believe that sila, character or behavior, has its roots in the depths of the mind rather than in the heat of the action (Lannoy, 1971, p. 295). Because all worldly acts are transient or part of the illusion of life, they can have no decisive moral significance. Within the Dance of Shiva, destruction exists as strongly as creation and preservation; so it is with India.

This is not to say that violence is condoned by Hindu faith; just the opposite is the case. However, Hindus avoid the theological use of the terms good and evil and prefer to speak of knowledge and ignorance, vidya and avidya. Destructive acts done by people who are ignorant are not regarded as sins, but those acts committed by people aware of their responsibilities are counted against them in their seeking of mukti.

Bathing in the holy water of the Ganges is believed to wash away all of a person’s sins and is required of all Hindus at least once in their lives. Indians tend to synthesize or integrate with nature because they assume this is the natural relationship of human beings with the world, unlike Westerners who tend to exploit the physical environment for their own purposes. But the belief in the spiritual purity of the Ganges is so strong that government attempts to clean up the badly polluted waters have little chance of being effective. Many people simply do not accept that anything can spoil the Ganges’ perfection. As a consequence, rotting carcasses of both animals and partly cremated people are a common sight along the river banks. The image of death among life, decomposition next to creation, and pollution mixed with purity is evocative of the Dance of Shiva.
Another pervasive social dimension in India is the caste system (verna), which is now officially outlawed but is still a source of constant tension. Following the assumed natural law that an individual soul is born into its own befitting environment, Hindus assume an individual belongs to a caste by birth. There are four main castes, each of which contributes to society in specific ways: brahmans as seers or religious people; administrators; producers such as skilled craftspeople and farmers; and followers or unskilled laborers. Each of these natural classes has its appropriate honors and duties, but as privilege has entered the scale, with top castes profiting at the expense of those lower down, the whole system has begun to disintegrate. Below the system is a fifth group, the Untouchables (now called Dacoits), who lie outside of the major activities of society. Members of this group are engaged in work that is considered socially undesirable and unclean. Untouchability, as it exists today, is often described as a perversion of the original caste system.

Within each caste or group there are numerous subcastes, or jati, which influence the immediacy of all daily social relations, including work. About 3,000 jati exist, and they are further divisible into about 30,000 sub-jati, with unwritten codes governing the relationships between jatis. Friendships with members of the same jati tend to be closer and more informal than those with members of other jatis. As a general rule, a person's name provides information not only about his jati but also about the region of the country from which the person's family originated. For example, Gupta is a family name from the trading class, although many have gone into the professions, especially teaching. Most Guptas come from the north Indian states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal.

The jati's values, beliefs, and prejudices become part of each individual's psyche or conscience. The internalized jati norms define the right actions or dharma for an individual—he or she feels good or loved when living up to these rules and guilty when transgressing them.

When society was divided strictly by caste, there was no attempt to realize a competitive equality, and within each caste all interests were regarded as identical. But that also meant equality of opportunity for all within the caste: Every individual was allowed to develop the experience and skills which he or she needed to succeed at the caste's defined role. The castes were self-governing, which ensured that people were tried and judged by their peers. Central authorities viewed crimes committed by upper caste members more severely than those committed by the lower caste. As it was simply not possible to move outside of the caste, all possibility of social ambition, with its accompanying tension, was avoided. This suits the Hindu belief in harmony. The comprehensiveness of the caste system, together with holistic dharma, contributed to the stability that prevailed among the vast mass of people for much of India's history. Preservation of order, interspaced with disorder, is a characteristic of the Dance of Shiva.

The worst fate of the caste system falls on the Untouchables. This caste has come to be the symbol of India's own brand of human injustice, victims of a system that kept people alive in squalor. Of course, social hierarchy is universal, found not only among the Hindus but also among the Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, and Jews (Srinivas, 1980). In addition, pollution taboos are prevalent in all civilizations, including the most advanced and modern; eliminating dirt is an attempt to introduce order into the environment (Lannoy, 1971, p. 146). But Hindu society pays exceptional attention to the idea of purity and pollution, and historically this has resulted in the virtual ostracism of the Untouchables from the rest of society.
By way of historical explanation, Hindus believed that proximity to the contaminating factor constitutes a permanent pollution, which is both collective and hereditary. Therefore, they had a dread of being polluted by members of society who were specialists in the elimination of impurity. Hindu society was more conscious of grading social groups according to their degree of purity than of dividing castes precisely into occupations. The Untouchables—traditionally society’s cleaners, butchers, and the like—were at the bottom of the Hindu hierarchy because they were considered irrevocably “unclean.” A similar caste system was developed in Japan, and it too has been outlawed, although its effects are still being felt.

While India’s traditional social structure was based on institutionalized inequality, today, the government, and supposedly the nation, is committed to social equality. Beginning with Mahatma Gandhi, public figures have tried to reform the attitudes of Indian society toward the Untouchables. Gandhi named them Harijan, literally “children of God.” The entire caste system was declared illegal by the constitution, and today, Untouchables are guaranteed 22.5% of government jobs as compensation for traditional disfavor. These policies have met with some success, but such a deep-rooted prejudice cannot be eliminated by a mere stroke of the pen.

The ambiguity of caste in occupational terms is another wedge by which the lower castes push their way upward on the scale. However, ambiguity is not so great as to render the system inoperative. Violations of caste norms, such as intercaste marriage, still evoke responses of barbaric ferocity. Educated Indians look on such incidents as throwbacks to the inhumanity of feudal times and believe that they must be dealt with sternly by the authorities. But efforts to create greater equality of opportunity for members of the traditionally disadvantaged castes meet stiff resistance from these same ranks (Narayana & Kantner, 1992, p. 5).

Additional reforms remain problematic, as recent history suggests. In 1990 the government introduced policies reserving 27% of jobs in central and state jobs for these castes and for Christian and Muslim groups that were socially backward. In protest, dozens of upper-caste students burned themselves to death. The upper caste Brahmins, a mere 5.5% of the population, have traditionally run government departments, but the struggle for jobs in India is so intense that the students saw themselves as victims of injustice, not as historical oppressors. The prime minister at the time, V. P. Singh, was forced to resign when the government’s coalition partner withdrew its support of the government, mainly over caste reform issues.

The Harijan quickly realized their ability to assert their democratic rights as equal citizens through organized political activity. The effect of politicization of caste in modern times has made it clear that power is becoming ascendant over status. Modern education also acts as a solvent of caste barriers. These factors hold out the best hope for the disappearance of caste over the longer term.

The hierarchical principle of social organization has been central to the conservatism of Indian tradition. Among the criteria for ordering are age and gender. Elders have more formal authority than younger people and, as we have already related, men have greater authority than women. Many times women are not involved in social functions or conversations and are required to cover their heads in front of elders or mature guests. Most relationships are hierarchical in structure, characterized by almost maternal nurturing on the part of the superior and by filial respect and compliance on the part of the subordinate. The ordering of social behavior extends to every institution in Indian life, including the workplace, which we will examine shortly.
It is clear that the traditional social structure of India is undergoing change and reform. This is consistent with the evolutionary aspects of the Dance of Shiva. But any change requires the destruction of old ways, and pressure is beginning to build within the old system. It may be that before those changes are complete, Shiva will rest, and chaos will rule for a time. Or perhaps a new rhythm is beginning for the dance of the 21st century, and the Daily Dance of Indian society will quietly adjust in response.

The Work and Recreation (Rejuvenation) Cycle

There are several different perspectives on the importance of work: to earn a living; to satisfy the worldly interests of accomplishments, power, and status; and to fulfill the desire to create and care for the family. An aspect considered more important in India is that work enables, prepares, and progresses the individual through the cycle of life toward the ultimate aim of achieving mukti. The Indian approach to work is best defined by the Bhagavad-Gita:

Both renunciation and practice of work lead to the highest bliss.
Of these two, the practice of work is better than its renunciation.

Work was originally prescribed as duty (dharma) without any concern for material outcomes. Castes were occupational clusters, each discharging their roles and, in turn, being maintained by the overall system. But meeting obligations to one’s relatives, friends, and even strangers and maintaining relationships constituted the ethos of the system. Even with the rapid expansion of industrial activity in the 20th century, requiring large-scale importation of Western technology and work forms, Western work values have been only partially internalized by Indians. Today, with government-mandated affirmative action, it is not unlikely that someone from a higher caste may work for someone from a lower class. Many Indians have developed a state of mind that allows them to put aside caste prejudice in the workplace but, on returning home, to conduct all their social activities strictly according to caste norms.

We have already seen how family life develops an acute sense of dependence in people, which serves to fortify the participative and collective nature of society. Similarly most Indian organizations have numerous overlapping in-groups, with highly personalized relationships between the members of each group. Members cooperate, make sacrifices for the common good, and generally protect each other’s interests. But in-groups often interfere with the functioning of formally designated sections, departments, and divisions, and their presence can lead to factionalism and intense power plays within an organization. Just as disorder within order is a characteristic of the Dance of Shiva, so too incompetence is often overlooked because work performance is more relationship oriented than contractual in nature. Competent people may be respected but not included in a group unless they possess the group characteristics.

Family, relatives, caste members, and people who speak the same language or belong to the same religion may form in-groups. There are typically regionally oriented subgroups, formed on the basis of states, districts, towns, and villages from
which people’s families originated. Within the group, Indians are very informal and friendly.

Geert Hofstede’s (1980a) attitudinal survey of the cultural differences between some 53 countries is especially helpful in the case of India, which tends to cluster with those countries where there is a high degree of uncertainty avoidance. Indians tend to work with lifelong friends and colleagues and minimize risk-taking behavior. This orientation is consistent with the Hindu philosophy of life as an illusion, Indians’ preoccupation with astrology, and their resignation to karma. India also falls with those countries characterized by large power distances. However, India ranks 21st of the 53 nations on individualism. While we might expect a more collectivistic orientation, this ranking may reflect the influence of British rule. Finally, India has a high score on masculinity, which is consistent with the emphasis on male-domination in Hinduism. Generally the values described by Hofstede reflect a historical continuity and resilience of the Indian social system, despite the onslaught of foreign invasions, colonial rulers, and economic dislocations.

The hierarchical principle continues to be a source of stagnation in modern Indian institutions. Younger people have a limited say or no say in decision making. Persistent critical questioning or confrontations on issues necessary to effect change simply do not occur. Any conflict between intellectual conviction and karma manifests itself in a vague sense of helplessness and impotent rage. Gradually the younger workers resign themselves to waiting until they become seniors in their own right, free to enjoy the delayed gratification that age brings with it in Indian society. The apparent lack of control and ambition displayed by workers is similar to the resignation of the world to the will of Shiva. The world responds to Shiva’s rhythm, captive of its pace, and is unable to influence it.

The importance of honoring family and jati bonds leads to nepotism, dishonesty, and corruption in the commercial world. These are irrelevant abstract concepts; guilt and anxiety are aroused only when individual actions go against the principle of primacy of relationships, not when foreign standards of ethics and efficiency are breached. This gives rise to legendary tales of corrupt officials, tales that are widely shared among travelers and businessmen who have spent time in India.

Indian organizations have been shaped by colonial experiences that have bureaucratized them and polarized the positions of the rulers (managers) and the ruled (workers). As a consequence, the role of the manager tends to be viewed as that of an order giver or autocrat. In “Going International” (1983), a popular management training videotape produced by Copeland Griggs Productions, San Francisco, there is a telling vignette involving an American manager and one of his Indian subordinate managers. As a general rule, American managers perceive their role to be that of a problem solver or facilitator and attempt to involve subordinates in routine decisions (Adler, 1997). The American manager in this videotape attempted to use this style with his Indian subordinate, who wondered about his superior’s competence and held him in some contempt for not being autocratic. The clear implication is that American managers must act more authoritatively in India than in the United States.

In the area of rejuvenation and recreation, one of its sources for the Indian people is the many religious festivals held throughout the year. These festivals are usually associated with agricultural cycles or the rich mythology of India’s past. In some regions community festivals involve the active participation not only of Hindus but of members of other religions, too. Family bonds are recurrently emphasized and strengthened through the joint celebration of religious festivals.
The Indian sense of fun and play is given free rein during the festivities, which often include riddles, contests of strength, role reversals, and rebellious acts. Just as the Dance of Shiva is an expression of his joy and exuberance, festivals give Hindus an opportunity to express their feelings of devotion and happiness.

Religious raptures, possessions, and trances are common during Indian seasonal festivals. This is a structured and, in some cases, highly formalized phenomenon that enriches the consciousness of the individual and the group. There are also the attendant dangers of degeneration into hysterical mob psychology, which Indian history has witnessed many times. Festivals allow the discharge of intense emotion, which is otherwise submerged in a network of reciprocity and caste relations, but they also can be used to reestablish order. In this sense festivals mirror the activity, relapse, and reordering of the cosmos that is the result of the Dance of Shiva. But just as the dancer cannot help dancing, celebrants are not always capable of restraining their religious fervor.

Memorials to the grand line of India’s “modern gods”—Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and now Indira Gandhi—are as much the objects of pilgrimage as any temple or festival. Indira Gandhi was killed by her own trusted Sikh bodyguards, just 5 months after she ordered the storming of the Golden Temple at Amritsar by the Indian army to dislodge Sikh rebels. Her home in New Delhi is now a museum and shrine visited by thousands daily. The spot in her garden where she was gunned down is bracketed by two soldiers; her bullet-ridden sari is on display inside. Crowds gather before these, many weeping. Another example is that of N. T. Rama Rao, a former movie star and chief minister of the state of Andhra Pradesh from 1983 to 1989. Rama Rao acted in leading roles in more than 320 films with mythical, historical, and folkloric themes. Among the masses, Rama Rao was associated with the qualities of the gods he played, and when he gave up his movie career to establish a new political party, he was immediately voted into office. The fact that his party’s radical Hindu fundamentalist policies sometimes caused strife within society is not inconsistent with the concurrently constructive and destructive nature of the Dance of Shiva.

The favorite pastime of Indians is watching movies, either at movie theaters or by renting videos from the shops that have sprung up all over the country, and today India’s “Bollywood” is the second-largest producer of films in the world. Movies that draw on images and symbols from traditional themes are dominant in popular Indian culture. They incorporate but go beyond the familiar repertoire of plots from traditional theater. Films appeal to an audience so diverse that they transcend social and spatial categories. The language and values from popular movies have begun to influence Indian ideas of the good life and the ideology of social, family, and romantic relationships. Robert Stoller’s (1975) definition of fantasy, the “protector from reality, concealer of truth, restorer of tranquility, enemy of fear and sadness, and cleanser of the soul” (p. 55), includes terms that are equally attributable to the illusory nature of the Dance of Shiva, and it is easy to understand why films play such a major role in Indian recreation and rejuvenation.

Summing Up

India is the heart of Asia, and Hinduism is a convenient name for the nexus of Indian thought. It has taken 1,000 to 1,500 years to describe a single rhythm of
its great pulsation, as described by the *Mahabharata*, or Great Epic. By invoking the image and meaning of the Dance of Shiva, and drawing parallels between this legendary act of a Hindu deity and many of the main influences of traditional Indian life, we have attempted to communicate the essence of India’s society in this chapter.

It is not always possible to identify a nicely logical or easily understandable basis for many of the contradictions that exist in Indian society, just as it is difficult to explain the existence of racism, sexism, and other forms of intolerance and injustice in Western countries. In India the philosophy of life and the mental structure of its people come not from a study of books but from tradition (Munshi, 1965, p. 148). However much foreign civilization and new aspirations might have affected the people of India, the spiritual nutrient of Hindu philosophy has not dried up or decayed (Munshi, 1965, p. 148); within this tradition the role of the Dance of Shiva, described below, is accepted by all Hindus (Coomaraswamy, 1924/1969):

Shiva rises from his rapture and, dancing, sends through inert matter pulsing waves of awakening sound. Suddenly, matter also dances, appearing as a brilliance around him. Dancing, Shiva sustains the world’s diverse phenomena, its creation and existence. And, in the fullness of time, still dancing, he destroys all forms—everything disintegrates, apparently into nothingness, and is given new rest. Then, out of the thin vapor, matter and life are created again. Shiva’s dance scatters the darkness of illusion (*lila*), burns the thread of causality (*karma*), stamps out evil (*avidya*), showers grace, and lovingly plunges the soul into the ocean of bliss (*ananda*). (p. 66)

India will continue to experience the range of good and bad, happiness and despair, creation and destruction. Through it all its people will continue their journey toward *moksha*, salvation from the worldly concerns of mankind. Hindu philosophy is the key to understanding India and how a nation of such diversity manages to bear its immense burdens while its people seem undeterred and filled with inner peace and religious devotion.

And through it all, Shiva dances on.