

# Wondering about Wonder

## An Introduction

TULASI SRINIVAS

### The Maze within Amazement

In 2006, I was at the Krishna Temple in Malleshwaram, a northern suburb in Bangalore<sup>1</sup> city in South India, one of the sites of my inquiry into ritual creativity. I was frustrated, as during the *mangalarathi* (offering of the sacred flame), I had not been able to get *darshan* (sacred sighting) of the deity, surrounded as I was by a phalanx of tall, male devotees who blocked my view. Krishna Bhattar, the chief priest of the temple, registered my frustration and annoyance. He took me aside and narrated a parable from the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*.

The *Mahabharata* recounts the story of a fratricidal war between two sets of royal cousins, the five Pandava brothers, and the hundred Kaurava kings. In one battle of the multiday war, one of the Pandava brothers, Arjuna, the master archer, lost faith in the meaning of the war. His wise counselor and skilled charioteer Krishna, an avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu, urged him to go to war, to kill his evil cousins, to free the kingdom of their poisonous influence, and to set the course of *dharma*, of justice.

Krishna Bhattar said that Arjuna was torn between his kinship loyalties to his cousins and his duty to purge the earth of evil. He was lost in an ethical quandary, a maze of moral problems, so much so that he laid down his bow and stopped fighting. Confused and in emotional

darkness, he asked Krishna how any murder of family could be a moral act. His ethical conundrum birthed the *locus classicus* the Bhagavad Gita, the central Hindu philosophical and ethical text, structured as a conversation between himself and Krishna (Easwaran 2007).

Krishna, the god in the guise of a charioteer, argued that this battle was indeed ethical, as it was ordained by divine will. Arjuna was skeptical. To prove his divinity and clinch the argument, Krishna decided to give Arjuna the ultimate gift, to have a *darshan* of the ultimate Godhead. Krishna showed Arjuna his true form, the fount of all reality, the all-encompassing *Vishwarupa* or divine form. In the *Vishwarupa* Arjuna saw the multiverse, its dark skies, exploding stars and brilliant suns, the earth, all its living beings, himself included, all in glorious technicolor. As Krishna Bhattar pointedly stated to me, Arjuna saw everything *in its true colors* and was stunned, dazzled, frightened, transported and silenced all at once. He stood amazed, the ethical maze he was caught in, forgotten.

I was mystified by this parable as a response to my frustration at not being able to see the deity. Was Krishna Bhattar suggesting that I needed to be a “better” devotee like Arjuna to get a good *darshan*? Or that I needed to have an ethical quandary to reveal some truth about life, reality, divinity, and the universe at large? Despite, or maybe *because* of my confusion, Krishna Bhattar carried the story to its point.

Arjuna was, he said, simply wonderstruck.

Many people will recognize Krishna Bhattar’s point; the transformative experience of being struck by wonder at the mysterious world and one’s place in it. But the story of Arjuna’s sudden access to the glorious and awe-inspiring *Vishwarupa* leaves us with a few questions: What exactly *was* Arjuna’s wonderment? What does it *do*? How can we understand it?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines wonder as “the emotion excited by the perception of something novel and unexpected,” and extending to an “astonishment mingled with perplexity or bewildered curiosity.” Descriptions of the experience of wonder are incomplete—the sudden gasp of surprise, the childlike amazement—wonder is seen as hard to hold onto, ineffable and evanescent, merely evinced through momentary slack-jawed surprise. In an attempt to grasp this slipperiness of wonder, Phillip Fisher has recently offered us the definition of wonder, “a sudden experience of an extraordinary object that produces delight,” which reveals to us the material otherness of the wonderful, and how little we actually know about it.

When we are wonderstruck, we are dazzled, lost for words, as our experience exceeds our frames of interpretation and “dissolves the ordinary meaning of things” (Schinkel 2019, 239–40). Wonder signifies that the world is “profounder, more all-embracing and mysterious than the logic of everyday reason had taught us to believe” (Pieper 1963, 102). We know that the experience of wonder breaks through the everyday, as did the Vishwarupa, allowing for a perspectival shift.

Indeed, as for Arjuna, the experience of wonder stems from this disruption, and it forces us to question our reality, perhaps even to transform it (Hepburn 1980). Wonder, as Opdal states, “is the state of mind that signals we have reached the limits of our present understanding, and that things may be different from how they look” (Opdal 2001, 332). And if modernity is a time of disenchantment, wonder enables a retrieval of enchantment and its perspectives towards a rethinking of the meaning of life itself. Not an entrenched preoccupation with the willful resuscitation of certain character traits in modern society, but rather, an acknowledgment of differential, and previously distant and invisible perspectives. Wonder enables one to you look upon oneself, as it were, from a remote corner of the universe—a flight of the imagination into the cosmos that disrupts the mundane, enabling new aesthetic, political and ethical stances.

## The Genealogy of Wonder

Wonder has had a home in Western philosophies, in the quest for an ethical life, where it has been understood variously as the internal state of enlightenment, the state of bewilderment leading to Socratic inquiry, and the Kantian sublime of beauty (Bynum 1997). Pieper emphasizes the essential nature of the connection between philosophy and wonder: “Wonder is not just the starting point of philosophy in the sense of initium, of a prelude or preface. Wonder is the principium, the lasting source, the *fons et origo*, the immanent origin of philosophy” (Pieper 1963, 8, 103). In the ancient Greek idea of *thaumatazein*, which is seen as akin to wonderment, there is an echo of the Vishwarupa where wonder descends from the immortal and the cosmological to the human and mortal level (Hepburn 1980). For the Greek philosophers, wonder was seen as the internal state of enlightenment, in which truth and beauty cohabited along with a Socratic *aporia*, a disorientation of passion (Bynum 1997). In Greek myth and storytelling inciting “various forms of

astonishment,” a sort of constant disorientation, was of central concern (Buxton 2009). Indeed, amazement and enchantment were central to the development of the disciplines of Western religion, philosophy, arts and literature (Schinkel 2017).

Jumping forward several centuries, this focus on wonder and its enchantment developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe, in tandem with the age of exploration and colonization. Responding to the enlarged geographical and mental horizons created by European exploration into distant places, wonder was found in the disconcerting effects of surprise and estrangement provoked by the burgeoning literature of global discovery, with its reports of new and wonderful lands and the beings that inhabited them. Plays and poetry, literature and cuisine, all responded to this wonderful derangement of the European senses (Schinkel 2019).

Even science and its twinned curiosities of the day, magic and alchemy, depended upon the curiosity provoked by wonder. As Dalston and Park (1998) demonstrate in their history of European naturalists from the High Middle Ages through the Enlightenment, wonder and wonders was central to envisioning themselves and the natural world. Tracing monsters, strange gems, odd horns, fossils, and plants encased in *Wunderkammern*, or cabinets of curiosity, Dalston and Park explain how wonder and wonders fortified princely power, rework the texture of scientific experience, and shaped the sensibility of modern intellectualism.

Later, European men of science from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century inflamed wonder, fusing it forever with the unknown, the frightening, the dreadful, the awesome, and the mysterious (Dalston and Park 1998; Holmes 2010; Griffiths 2003). These early scientists and doctors understood wonder as that which clung to the mysterious, fueled curiosity, and edged the curious toward experimental knowledge. Tim Ingold has argued for a renewal of this the sense of wonder, that has been “banished from official science” (2006, 9) as it suggests new realities and new possibilities, a way of contesting the received knowledge of the limits to living, as well as a way to transform the ontological possibilities of life itself (Scott 2016, 474–75).

This idea of the excitement of discovery followed wonder in the twentieth century, where the quest to comprehend wonder was taken up tangentially by the religion scholar Rudolph Otto, in an attempt to describe encounters with the divine. *Das Heilige (The Idea of the Holy)*, Otto’s masterpiece, is a treatise on the unknowability and ineffability of

wonder. In it, Otto argued that Arjuna's experience of the Vishwarupa was common to *all* human experience of divinity and that such human religious experiences of wonder and awe were the fulcrum of all religious life. He coined the neologism *the numinous*, based on the Latin word *numen* (divine power) to describe the ineffable feeling of awe, terror, and sublimity that such an interaction with the divine provoked ([1923] 1958, 15–17). For Otto, the numinous can be understood to be the experience of a mystery (*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) and majesty (*Majestas*) in the presence of that which is “entirely other” (*das ganz Andere*) and thus incapable of being expressed directly through human language and other media. In this physiognomic understanding, wonder included not only “the psychological process of affect, but in turn also its object, the holy,” a knowable attribute of the divine mystery that is discoverable (22).

This notion of discovery invests Mary Jane Rubenstein's work on the metaphysics of wonder. In her unearthing of comparative Platonic and Aristotelian notions of wonder, she argues that they were significantly different: where Aristotle sought to dissipate wonder and move toward reason and knowledge, Plato attempted to open us to the passions, to vulnerability and joy, to a different kind of knowing (Rubenstein 2008). Yet, as Rubenstein notes, both philosophers understood wonder was provoked by difference. It is the fact that Krishna is God, a different order of being than Arjuna, who encompasses within their divine self all of creation, that provokes the wonder of the Vishwarupa.

Such alternate spaces and beings form the ground on which wonder is generated and thrives. For this reason, critical thinkers who wish to link wonder and alterity in their cultural histories or ethics begin in *otherness* (Greenblatt 1991; Arendt 1978). As Jerome Miller (1992) suggests, wonder is born in curiosity about difference. In short, the Western intellectual history of wonder recognizes it as difference that locates sublimity. Yet, oddly, until recently, despite this supposed focus on the other, wonder has been located solely in Western thought. So the provocation for our shared work in this volume arose in the question, Can wonder be located in the South Asian context?

For anthropologists and ethnohistorians like our contributors, the otherness that undergirds wonder and the curiosity it enfolds is central to our practice and theory. Margaret Mead has stated, in an oft-cited quote, “Anthropology demands the open-mindedness with which one must look and listen, record in astonishment and wonder that which

one would not have been able to guess” (Mead 1977, ix). Wonder and astonishment are a part of anthropologists’ interaction with “other” societies and cultures despite ethnography’s dark history, twinned forever as it is with imperialism and the movement, subjugation, and exploitation of people (Pels and Salamink 2000). The recognition of an Other’s potential, and right to a meaningful life, has been centrally debated in the history of the discipline, positioning it vitally to speak to otherness and the wonderment it can provoke. Our shared question developed further: Can we see a way to invite an ethnography rescued from its poisonous inheritances, through South Asian examples?

Clifford Geertz, though sensitive to ethnography’s difficult history, has argued, in keeping with Mead, that ethnographers evoke wonder and relay it. See them as “merchants of astonishment” who “hawk the anomalous, peddle the strange,” who with “no little success have sought to keep the world off balance; pulling out rugs, upsetting tea tables and setting off firecrackers,” Geertz argues that ethnography and anthropology as whole is a disruptive discipline that elevates the disruption of wonder into a method (Geertz 2001, 64). This destabilization of worlds is what Michael Scott has written about drawing together wonder and anthropology, to suggest that if wonder is the beginning of philosophy as Greek thinkers would have it, then wonder also marks the genesis of curiosity of an encounter with the Other. It is in this sense of a method of productive disruption that the contributors to this volume have read wonder, leading to delightful essays that contemplate and probe disruptions as profitable to extend the limits of our understanding of different worlds.

The pursuit of wonder, located in many recent ethnographies, is “charged with a passionate pursuit of wonder and an earnest desire to affirm that beings and becoming(s) are wonderful” (Scott 2014, 49). The broad characterization of wonder as encompassing amazement, astonishment, awe, dread, horror, and marvel offers the center point of wonder that Arjuna experienced—an ontological destabilization (Timmer and Tomlinson 2020) rooted in multiplicity, flux, and generativity that productively engages difference.

From his deep ethnographic work among the Arosi people of Makira in the Solomon Islands, the anthropologist Scott develops different modalities of wonder that encompass such revelation of difference and alterity that attend to everyday life and engage the curiosity and bafflement that follows, forcing, to my mind, a critical and haunting engagement with ethics. This understanding of wonder—as an aesthetical

concern that leads inexorably to ethics—is a call to bring us closer to an understanding of it as both index and instrument that enables an ontological destabilization of the known, the true and the real.

Here we offer an affirmative response to that call in our collection of essays by scholars, established and emergent, that invite and incite hopeful ways of thinking about difference, that engage the building of new and transformative worlds, and provoke new ethical and imaginative horizons.

### The Cow in the Elevator and Ethnographies of Wonder

In 2018, I published a book titled *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder*, in which I explored creativity in ritual forms in Hindu temples in Bangalore city in South India. In the book's introduction I revealed that several ritual practitioners in the Hindu temples engaged in ritual innovation, playing with ritual forms and contexts routinely. They suggested that devotees needed *adbhuta* in their lives, which I repeatedly translated as “oddity” or “the strange.” And yet, one day when I happened to translate *adbhuta* as wonder, I began to understand that the pursuit of wonder and its disorientation was the space in which ritualists wanted to dwell. It occurred to me that perhaps the traditional European understandings of wonder as an uncontrolled “act of god” were not sufficient in the South Asian context. Indeed, it became clear to me that the anthropology of wonder describes and invites a transformation, and that wonder can help us pry open the meaning of life itself (Srinivas 2018).

Through a detailed ethnography that took my interlocutors concerns seriously, I argued that these creative rituals were focused on the pursuit of wonder that, as I saw it, enabled my interlocutors to deal with the uncertainty and disorientation that neoliberal modernity brought into their lives, the waiting, the precarity, the temporal, spatial, and affective shifts. Wonder was the element of transformation individually and collectively birthing communities and new aesthetics of rituals in its wake and that these new aesthetics allowed for both a capturing and subversion of neoliberalism at the same time, enabling a joyful resistance to and acceptance of the uncertainties that neoliberal modernity brought (Srinivas 2018).

Exploring wonder as a transformative state that was pursuable, I examined how the affective experience of wonder and the ineffable

quality of that which is wondrous have been indelibly braided together. I argued that wonder allowed for creative ritual in the everyday through a development of curiosity, and curiosity and creativity together birthed a compassion that built to a radical social hope in time of neoliberal precarity and uncertainty. Finally, I proposed that that wonder, and its cognates of awe, marvel, astonishment, and amazement, in its evocation of hope, was both a symptom and a mode of challenge to existing ontological assumptions about being and becoming (Srinivas 2018). But, as I finished the manuscript, I realized that rather than seeing wonder outside the Western world as reflective of the European example, wonder in non-Western societies was rarely acknowledged or understood.

For example, in South Asia, the magical experience of wonder has been a central paradigm of knowledge of the divine, found in theological treatises as wide ranging as the Bhagavad Gita or Kabir's poetry, yet the sense of dislocation that wonder provides has been seen through the lens of devotion or *bhakti*, more as a tool for the pedagogical cultivation of the devout self than an analysis of wonder itself.

Coalescing around such productive dislocations, the ontological ruptures that wonder provokes is the pivot around which this book hinges. The cultural anthropological questions that this book drew inspiration from and leads back to are: Are certain forms of wonder specific to certain cultures? Are certain peoples more primed to be sensitive to wonder than others? And these in turn lead to the other quintessential question in cultural anthropology: Is there something universal or particular about how we experience and evoke wonder?

I became curious as to how many others who studied South Asia had tripped over wonder in their own anthropological work, and had seen it as the cultivation of the devout self, or not known what to make of it and relegated it to the sidelines, uncertain of how to make space for it in their ethnographies and in their texts. My questions were simple in the beginning: Had wonder emerged in my friends' fieldwork? Had it slipped away before they could process it? As I grew bolder I asked, What does wonder look like in South Asia? Then the questions grew to become ever more encompassing: How can we begin to think of the real in relation to the braiding of the ordinary and the extraordinary in everyday life? Does the diaphanous concept of wonder play a critical role in the envisioning of the future? How does that affect people's understandings of what constitutes a good and valuable life? Can wonder transform worlds?



This collection of essays gathered together as an anthology of wonder in South Asia, presents reflections upon the history, proliferation, politics, emotional aspects, aesthetics, ethics, transformative potential, enduring appeal, meaning and the future of wonder among the religions of South Asia. It is divided into three sections: “Histories,” “Aesthetics,” and “Ethics.” Highly respected authors and researchers, representing the varied and sometimes competing perspectives of the study of wonder in the subcontinent, provide a fascinating and instructive voyage into the social, experiential, expressive, and textual worlds of wonder, arguing that wonder is “good to think with.” It is our hope that this work will broaden the discourse on wonder to use it as a helpful theorizing trope and to cultivate conversations among those who seek to interrogate or abandon modernity’s fictions in search of the other-wise, the relational, the marginal, and the wonder-full in and of South Asia.

We seek together to apprehend wonder’s oscillating visions through ethnographies and histories that engage wonder or the wonder adjacent. As indicated in my own struggles with linguistic translation of the idea of wonder, in the following pages wonder and language interdigitize in surprising new ways. The collective also acts as a kind of glossary of wonder in South Asia and in that sense this volume presents an anthropology all of its own (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

A secondary focus of this work is rooted in the peculiar interplay between religious philosophy and experiential wonder in South Asia. This is something that must be explored in more depth. These essays describe the many worlds of wonder in varied sites of and about South Asian life—mystical Sufi shrines, houses of Swaminarayan devotees, Rajasthani healing shrines, Tamil cremation grounds, American fantasy novels, Kuchipudi and Dhammal performances, and Dara Sacha Saudha satsangs. And, as varied as these sites are, equally varied are the evocations of wonder, its practices and meanings. Rather than a singular understanding of wonder evoked in European understandings, the multivocality of wonder in South Asia emerges in these pages.

Our invitation therefore is to illuminate and engage the plural meanings of wonder and the interspersal paths between them, as we seek to disturb the singularity, universality, and totality of the Eurocentric understanding of wonder. The proposition centers around an undoing of Eurocentricism’s claims and frames of knowledge and meaning, the unraveling of what Michel Ralph Trouillot has termed “North Atlantic

abstract universal fictions,” toward a “decolonial pluriversality” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 69–72).

By taking up the invitation to consider these and similar questions, we can also unveil the religiosity that undergirds Western secular theories of wonder, to provincialize the Western canon and displace the universal abstraction on which the rhetoric of Western modernity rests, to disobey the logics of colonial inheritance capitalisms. By thinking about wonder in South Asia, we open the joints of meaning, emotion, and action to consider coexistent temporalities and spatialities. The essays in the book connect and bring together histories, subjectivities, knowledges, and narratives that are in conversation with, and provide an alternative to, Western thought on wonder. The underpinning of this volume is the deep sensing by the authors that wonder enables a path to do this work of decolonization.

Additionally, we seek to interrupt the idea of wonder as purely philosophical to give it location and contours. Wonder here is the strategic creation of a bewildering yet ecstatic experience that is sought in religious publics through the introduction of the novel and the strange. Accordingly, then, we need ethnographies of wonder to get at wonder’s ontology as a counterpoint to wonder’s rarified existence in Western philosophical and literary texts, both to think about the mood of wonder as willed, and the pursuit of wonder as a considered and strategic act (Scott 2016). So the anthropological proposition of this work is modest, built on three pillars of inquiry: Can we eff the ineffability of wonder? Can we see the pursuit of wonder, its discourses, and practices as passionate acts that can be provoked and “stoked” to shift and transform assumptions of life and being in South Asia? And what are the ethical implications that practitioners need to consider before embracing such a creative ethos?

Lastly, in our thinking, theory and praxis are interwoven and we seek to decolonize the Western separation of theory and practice to invite us to consider the ways in which fieldwork encounters and experiences may engender wonder for the ethnographer, and assess the possibilities for capturing and representing wonder in the resulting ethnographic texts. By engaging wonder as we do in this book, we set in motion an ethnographic approach to wonder from an-other perspective, rendering an account of what generates wonder when the ontological premises at stake are those of neither the Cartesian dualism that are the understood characteristic of modernity, nor the relational nondualism commonly imputed to anthropological “others” (Scott 2016; Cicovacki 2014). If a

“new world is possible,” we need a new set of ideas and imaginaries to make this world possible. This volume is rooted in the idea that ethnographic texts are praxis and theory in one; deeply transformative of self and the world, and so akin to wonder itself.

## South Asian Wonders

### SECTION I: HISTORIES

In chapter 1, anthropologist and ethnographer extraordinaire Ann Gold considers history as biography. Drawing on field notes, diaries, interviews, and memories spanning the *longue durée* of forty years in Ajmer and Bhilwara districts in the Banas River Basin of Rajasthan, her retrospective essay offers a stunning verbal panoramic sweep over vignettes from different eras in one region of North India. The earliest of these materials date from 1980 and the most recent from the second decade of the twenty-first century. Incorporating long-forgotten testimonies transpiring or originating at a single place—Kuchalwara Mataji, a healing shrine dedicated to a Hindu goddess—Gold responds to the initial provocation of wonder’s architecture to consider: curiosity, creativity, compassion—as insufficient, and adds connection and communication as inherent and important to wonder stories. Telling these stories is essential to their nature, she argues, and the panorama of stories over forty years collected by one ethnographer not only reveals multiple ways that connections among people, animals and spirits are both exemplified and forged in wonderous experience, but also the singular focus and dedication that a lifetime of ethnography requires.

Chapter 2 sees William Elison trace the imagery of the elephant-headed Lord Ganesh in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American fiction, to reflect upon the quality or affective valence of wonder. Tracing the advent of Ganesh in literary forms such as in Rudyard Kipling’s and H. P. Lovecraft’s stories, as well as the Conan the Barbarian series, Elison terms these weird tales “idolatry stories” and he argues, persuasively, that they emerge from a growing American fascination with Hindu idols, and their reading as an “existential threat” to Western civilization. Interweaving Coomarasawmy’s idea of the Pali term *samvega*, “aesthetic shock,” Elison argues that these weird tales that interpolate fantasy and dread do not pose a challenge to the philosoph-

ical conditions underwriting this world's existence, rather, they open up new worlds of wonder.

In chapter 3, historian Mary Hancock shifts our temporal frame to the early nineteenth century when India or “Hindustan” acquired a vivid presence in the imaginations of many Americans. Images depicting India and Indians as “exotic and barbaric, magical and menacing, beneficial and perilous,” were promulgated in fairs, expositions, and department stores, and in the cultural and geographic narratives of both Christian and secular publications. Accordingly, Hancock rewrites our understanding of wonder to include horror. Focusing on the mission in the antebellum period as the site where the most sustained connections between the US and India were forged, Hancock argues that mission practice recoiled from Hindu religious iconography and belief casting it as the “other.” This Orientalist reading of wonder was in conversation with the historical and cultural analysis of wonder's persistence and mutability. Hancock makes the case for wonder acting as a fulcrum for comparative thinking about religion.

## SECTION 2: AESTHETICS

In both chapters 4 and 5, performance traditions in South Asia and their evocations of wonderment are examined. In chapter 4, Jazmin Graves Eyssallenne examines the workings of wonder in the Sufi devotional tradition of Sidis (Indians of African ancestry) that centers on the veneration of African Rifai Sufi ancestral saints entombed in the Bharuch district of Gujarat. This chapter situates “play” as a technology of wonder in the Sidi Sufi tradition. Play encompasses participation in the Sidi devotional song and dance performance called *dhammal* or *goma* that invites the presence of the saints through ecstatic embodiment. Wonder in this context is identified as *wajd* encompassing reverence, excitement, and supplication that are the precursor to and prerequisite for the devotee's experience of the ineffable quality of the saints' presence via an ecstatic state of possession (*hal*). The “play” signals the confluence of Sufi, Hindu, and eastern African ideological frameworks and ritual practices in the Sidi devotional tradition, contributing to the study of wonder in different temporal, ethnic, and embodied dimensions.

In chapter 5, Harshita Mruthinti Kamath focuses granularly on the *stri-vesham*, or the donning of a woman's guise, ubiquitous to the performance and religious repertoire of Smarta Vaidiki Brahmin men of Kuchipudi village (located in the Krishna district in the South Indian

state of Andhra Pradesh) to explore the aesthetics of wonder. For generations, brahmin men from the Kuchipudi village have been taking on the *stri-vesham* to enact female characters from Hindu religious narratives. Such impersonation draws on a broader repertoire of gender crossings across South Asia in which men can become women, women can become men, and gods can impersonate humans. Kamath explores how rapid transitions across male and female characters require both special costuming and manipulations in bodily movement ultimately inculcating a sense of astonishment and wonder for the spectator, as she considers both the creative and disruptive potential of wonder enacted through the body of the guised Kuchipudi dancer.

In chapter 6, Aniruddhan Vasudevan introduces us to the *Thirunangai Maruladis*, trans women performers in ritual genres in the city of Chennai, Tamil Nadu, who are deeply devoted to the worship of the goddess Angalamman, a regional deity. As the Tamil word *maruladi* suggests, this mode of devotion involves dancing the deity in states of trance. Vasudevan challenges us to think about the Thirunangais as “adjacent to wonder” through both their discourses and practices of *asandhu podhal* or astonishment that takes palpable form in the financial resources they muster for, and expend in organizing the annual rituals for the goddess. Thirunangais take pride in their ability to deliver a spectacle that turns upon the astonishment of the spectators, and see that as having moral value. Asking the productive question of whether there are ontological premises at stake in thirunangai discourses and practices of astonishment Vasudevan draws attention to a traffic in wonder that exists between thirunangai-maruladis, the goddess herself, and community at large.

Chapter 7 focuses on the spectacular urban festival of Mayana Kollai (looting of the cremation ground). Amy Allocco’s beautifully detailed chapter analyzes the potential for wonder in the festival as it is performed by the community of priests, trustees, and devotees of the Angalaparameshwari (Angalamman) temple in Chennai. Allocco’s reading of the festival holds open space to consider how the processes of wonder play through it. Here the prospect of wonder is assessed in light of the broader repertoire of Tamil vernacular affective categories that are identified by festival participants as essential to the festival. Perhaps most generative for the chapter’s focus on “wonder” are the ritual activities that transpire in the cremation ground itself, where men from the Angalaparameshwari temple fashion an enormous figure out of cremation ashes and, in a highly charged atmosphere, the figure is quickly destroyed

by those who mount and stomp on it as well as those who grab handfuls of the ash to be brought home as *prasādam*, or consecrated material. As it traces themes of ritual creativity, death, and rebirth, this chapter tests the creative potential and the limits of the category of wonder.

Chapter 8 broadens the lens on the theme of abundance that Vasudevan’s and Allocco’s chapters subtly introduce to relocate the interrogation of wonder to the banks of the Ganges during the Kumbh Mela festival, the largest religious gathering on earth. Amanda Lucia’s study of the festival focuses on the economies of wonder, by which she means the circulatory production, distribution, and consumption practices that encapsulate a religious spectacle, proffering the affective experience of wonder. Lucia argues that there has been a marked increase in the religious exhibits designed to cultivate the affective experience of wonder at the Kumbh Melā over the past twenty years, and they have gotten larger and more extravagant, attracting many millions of spectators. The exhibits are, she states, identity-making projects for the gurus and religious organizations who host them; as also an attempt to reenchanted a world that is becoming increasingly disenchanted through secular materialism. Wonder is about enchantment, and as such it draws marked contrast to the disenchantments characteristic of modernity—the tedium of the struggles of everyday life, the waiting, and the precarity. Here wonder is cyclical, as objects are discarded in the landfills of “wonder-trash” and replaced by newer and more elaborate objects of wonder.

### SECTION 3: ETHICS

In chapter 9, Quinn Clark follows Lucia to consider economies of wonder, but the discussion pivots from symbolic economies of excess to the problems of hard coin in Sufi saint shrines. As he argues, Sufi shrines have acquired an idealized reputation as utopian spaces free of divisive politics, intolerance, and hierarchy, yet they are also highly politicized and economized through the distribution of cash seen as favors from the saints and God. Interlocutors see the “negative” aspects of shrine operations as a natural consequence of money being involved, whereas the “positive” aspects arise from *barakah*, or the love of God manifest as a blessing. Why is money considered corrupting in some contexts but freely and openly circulated in the ritualized context shrine-based celebrations? Based on ethnographic research in Lucknow, Clark analyzes money as both social concept and as a material object, arguing that a

focus on money reflects the fundamental scarcity in which Muslims find themselves living in neoliberal India today, in opposition to what they see as its *barakah*, the infinite abundance emerging from an eternal God tilting money between hard coin and a moral or ethical object.

Chapter 10 advances the established links between wonder and the meaning of life through an exploration of how wonder flows through devotional practice of BAPS Swaminarayan followers in Gujarat, primarily through their interpretations of remembered encounters between the followers and the movement. Hanna Kim argues that follower's wondrous experiences leave an imprint that calls for interpretive strategies or ways to make sense of the affective memory through an assemblage of discourses. Kim carefully traces Swaminarayan ontologies of devotion where elements of surprise are centered and central. Following interlocutors as they reexamine moments of surprise that, by their retelling, convey a sense of something more than a memory, that builds towards "revised attitude to living," or what Kim terms an "ethics of sociality." She argues that that exposure to BAPS Swaminarayan discourses can offer the means to reify an affective experience into a playbook for ethical living with equanimity and care for others, alerting us to the experience and aftermath of an encounter with wonder and how it can guide the subject and ethnographer to productive ends, ethically and ethnographically.

Finally, in chapter 11 Jacob Copeman and Koonal Duggal build upon the idea of spectacle to explore how wonder is generated and experienced, questions that lie at the heart of the popularity of the Dera Sacha Sauda, a guru-led movement that is the focus of their analysis. Drawing on their previous work on gurus' "methodologies of presence," focusing on the Guru's spectacular entries into crowds of gathered devotees on a home-made army tank and other miraculous forms of transport, and devotees' responses to them in person and online, Copeman and Duggal argue that the Guru's strategic generation of "wonder effects" creates what Mary Jane Rubenstein has termed an appropriative stupefaction that is based on the Guru's relentless staging of new and newer marvels. Copeman and Duggal provide a provisional account of the Dera Sacha Sauda guru's experiments in wonder to argue that these spectacles are "wondertraps" (that reflect a kind of postcolonial kitsch aesthetic) that create a "devotion of attractions" for devotees. Copeman and Duggal describe the co-implication of entrapment and wonder, and how devotee labor is frequently required to set the wondertraps via which the replenishment and augmentation of the same labor supply is accomplished, which in

turn enables more wondertraps to be laid. This cyclical pursuit of ever greater devotee numbers through a strategic pursuit of wonder, reflects the ethical problems that such a repeated enhancement of wonder generates.

## Note

1. I have retained the colonial name of the city with which I am familiar, though the name was changed to the precolonial name of Bengaluru in 2006.

## Works Cited

- Arendt, Hannah. 1978. *The Life of the Mind*. San Diego: Harcourt.
- Buxton, Richard. 2009. *Forms of Astonishment: Greek Myths of Metamorphosis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1997. "Wonder." *American Historical Review* 102 (1): 1–26.
- Cicovacki, Predrag. 2014. *The Analysis of Wonder: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicolai Hartmann*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus, eds. 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. 25th anniversary ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dalston, Lorraine, and Katharine Park. 1998. *Wonder and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750*. New York: Zone.
- Easwaran, Eknath, trans. 2007. *The Bhagavad Gita*. 2nd ed. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri.
- Geertz, Clifford. 2001. *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. 1991. *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hepburn, R. W. 1980. "The Inaugural Address: Wonder." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vols., 54:1–23.
- Ingold, Tim. 2006. "Rethinking the Animate, Re-animating Thought." *Ethnos* 71 (1): 9–20.
- Irigaray, Luce. 2004. *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings*. New York: Continuum.
- Mead, Margaret. 1977. *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*. New York: Morrow.
- Mignolo, Walter, and Catherine E. Walsh. 2018. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Miller, Jerome A. 1992. *In the Throe of Wonder: Intimations of the Sacred in a Post-modern World*. Albany: State University of New York Press.



- Opdal, Paul Martin. 2001. "Curiosity, Wonder and Education Seen as Perspective Development." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 20:331–44.
- Otto, Rudolph. (1923) 1958. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University press.
- Pels, Peter, and Oscar Salamink, eds. 2000. *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Pieper, Josef. 1963. *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*. New York: Mentor Omega.
- Rubenstein, Mary-Jane. 2008. *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schinkel, Anders. 2017. "The Educational Importance of Deep Wonder." *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 51 (2): 538–53.
- . 2019. "Wonder, Mystery, and Meaning." *Philosophical Papers* 48 (2): 293–319.
- Scott, Michael W. 2016. "To Be Makiran Is to See like Mr. Parrot: The Anthropology of Wonder in Soloman Islands." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (3): 474–95.
- Srinivas, Tulasi. 2018. *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Vasalou, Sophia. 2015. *Wonder: A Grammar*. Albany: State University of New York Press.