



# Dealing with Deities

*The Ritual Vow in South Asia*

Edited by  
Selva J. Raj and William P. Harman

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SELVA J. RAJ

AND

WILLIAM P. HARMAN

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*For*  
*J. Charles Amalathas, Bindu Madhok, George Strander,*  
*Richard Good, and Lilan Laishley*

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## Acknowledgments

This book is our modest attempt to share with a wider public the richness and vibrancy of lay religious life in South Asia. A chance meeting at the Midwest American Academy of Religion in St. Louis began our collaboration, one in which we discovered a sense of intellectual kinship and an affinity for religion in southern India. Since then, we have sought for several years to identify what variables might constitute a central characteristic of South Asian lay religion, variables that, we suspected, might transcend religious, cultural, ethnic, and geographic boundaries. Eventually, we found ourselves focusing on the phenomenon of lay vows. We settled on a plan to investigate the practice of vow-taking in the six major religious traditions of South Asia (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism).

In conversations with colleagues specializing in various South Asian religious traditions, we discovered a common concern for vows as ritual anchors in the lives of the faithful throughout much of South Asia. We organized a panel entitled “Dealing with the Deity: Religious Vows in South Asian Hindu, Muslim, and Christian Places of Worship” for the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in 1998 in Orlando as a prelude to an edited volume. With Paul Courtright presiding, Tracy Pintchman, Vasudha Narayanan, William Harman, and Selva Raj presented papers on Hindu, Muslim, and Christian vows. Mary McGee served as respondent at this panel. We thank the participants for enthusiastically signing onto the project long before we were certain of its eventual outcome. Several members in the audience—too many to mention by name—offered constructive feedback and helpful suggestions for which we are grateful. Encouraged by colleagues’ interest and support, we organized two panels for the 18th Quinquennial Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in Durban, South Africa, where a new team of scholars, including Martin Baumann, Jack Llewellyn, and Karen Pechilis, presented their research

on the subject of lay vows. The feedback and support we received after these panels provided further stimulus to forge ahead with our project. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to each of our contributors for their intellectual generosity, collegiality, patience, and understanding as this volume took shape. Their collective expertise has been a source of constant reinvigoration for us.

We offer our thanks to the many scholars who first isolated the vow as a basic element in the lives of South Asian women. Their studies provided sensitive and sensible models for our own research on lay vows in South Asia. Notable among these author–investigators are Susan Wadley, Anne Pearson, Mary McGee, Ann Gold, and June McDaniel. Our special thanks to Ann Gold, who recognized before we did that “dealing with deities” is an appropriate way to talk about South Asian religious activity. Corinne Dempsey, Rachel McDermott, and Paul Watt supported our work in various ways. They deserve special thanks. We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of our initial manuscript. They provided insightful and constructive comments that greatly aided in revising the essays. On the home fronts, we are indebted to Albion College for the Stanley S. Kresge endowed professorship and two Hewlett-Mellon grants that supported Selva Raj’s field research. Our thanks are also due to Albion College’s Instructional Technology staff, especially Cathy Saville, Melinda Kraft, Robin Miller, and Ralph Haughton for providing valuable technical support. The Martha Rieth Faculty Research Fellowship awarded by DePauw University to William Harman provided both time and funds for much of the preliminary research and writing that led to the book we now have. We are grateful for that assistance as well as for the assistance of the University Honors program and Professor Greg O’Dea of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. The Honors program made available Derek Gosma, who patiently and cheerfully assembled parts of the index. We are deeply indebted to Nancy Ellegate, Senior Acquisitions Editor at the State University of New York Press, for her remarkable patience, uncommon practical wisdom, and exemplary humanity in the preparation of this manuscript. We thank Kelli Williams, Senior Production Editor at the State University of New York Press, for her assistance and counsel, and Dana Foote for her careful copyediting of the manuscript. Our thanks also to the State University of New York Press for permission to reprint “‘The Vow’: A Short Story,” by Shankarrao Kharat and to use four photographs (Figures 13.1, 13.2, 13.3, and 13.4) that appear in Tracy Pintchman’s recent book *Guests at God’s Wedding: Celebrating Kartik among the Women of Benares* (2005).

The contributors and the editors express their deep appreciation and gratitude to the countless South Asian devotees who generously and willingly shared their lives and cherished stories with us. We have been abundantly enriched by this contact. During the summer of 2002, together we visited several of the sites mentioned in the essays in this volume. We shall never forget the remarkable receptions we received at St. John de Britto Shrine in Oriyur, at Kabaleeshwarar

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Temple in Chennai, at the Samayapuram Mariyamman Temple, at the Bangla Saheb Gurdwara in New Delhi, and at the dargah of Shahul Hamid in Nagore. Whitney Kelting was our hostess when we visited the Jain community in Pune where our welcome was as touching as it was informative. Kamal Mustafa took us under his wing in Chittagong and helped us to visit every Muslim Sufi shrine in the region. His gracious enthusiasm was infectious and inspiring. A finer source of information on Islam in Chittagong would be almost impossible to find.

Selva J. Raj  
William P. Harman  
Albion and Chattanooga



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## Sites Associated with Ritual Vows

Arulanandapuram:	A tiny Catholic village near Madurai, Tamil Nadu, where the shrine of St. Anne is located.
Ayodhya:	An ancient north Indian city sacred to Hindus and Buddhists, and home to many Ramananda Sampraday ascetics.
Benares:	Hindu holy city and pilgrimage site on the banks of the Ganges River, where millions of Hindus bathe to gain earthly blessings and ultimate liberation. Hindu women's communities studied by Pintchman regularly undertake domestic vows here.
Chennai:	Formerly known as Madras, Chennai is the capital of the state of Tamil Nadu and a major city for Shaiva devotion. The famed Kabaleeshwarar temple is located in Chennai.
Chittagong:	A major port town in Bangladesh that has scores of Sufi Muslim shrines ( <i>mazars</i> ).
Kataragama:	Major center in Sri Lanka for vow rituals and for the worship of Kanda Kumara. Here Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians dedicate vow rituals to a popular Hindu deity.
Nagore:	Location of the tomb of Shahul Hamid where vow rituals are offered in Tamil Nadu by Hindus and Muslims.
New Delhi:	Capital city of India and location of a major Sikh temple ( <i>gurdwara</i> ).
Oriyur:	Martyrdom site of St. John de Britto and a major pilgrimage center for various vow rituals in rural southeastern Tamil Nadu.

Pune:	A major city in western India and home to a large concentration of Svetembra Jains.
Samayapuram:	Village location of a major temple near Tiruchirapalli dedicated to Mariyamman, the Tamil goddess of disease and healing.
Uvari:	A coastal village in Tamil Nadu and location of a major Catholic pilgrimage center dedicated to St. Anthony.



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## Introduction

### The Deal with Deities—Ways Vows Work in South Asia

SELVA J. RAJ AND WILLIAM P. HARMAN

Setting out to find common threads among the major religious traditions of South Asia—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism—had better be a daunting task. Our resolve here is to propose a few modest but significant generalizations about six major religious traditions as they are understood by specialist scholars who offer here their collective expertise. The ambitious abstraction of our task may be, we hope, balanced by the fact that we are offering specific studies of particular religious practices in specific locations involving particular groups of devotees. Still, the sacred places studied vary enormously. They include the Muslim shrine of Shahul Hamid in Nagore; the Hindu Mariyamman temple at Samayapuram in Tamil Nadu; newly constructed Hindu temples for Sri Lankan immigrants in Germany; the majestic Sikh Bangla Saheb Gurdwara in New Delhi; Sufi Muslim shrines (*mazars*) in Chittagong, Bangladesh; Christian shrines in southern India, including those dedicated to St. Anne, St. Anthony, and St. John de Britto; and the Buddhist Kanda Kumara Shrine in Kataragama, Sri Lanka. Culturally, historically, and geographically we propose to cut across a wide swath of spiritually significant locations and traditions.

Well before undertaking this project we were aware that scholars have quibbled—and continue to quibble, almost ad nauseam—in their attempts to isolate the defining features of religiosity in South Asia. One ominous instance: Hinduism, one of the most dominant traditions of this region, seems to defy all attempts to define its essential or unique characteristics (Smith 1988: 32–55).

Recently, in a public forum that was later published, specialists in Hinduism brought a bewildering series of perspectives to bear on attempts to determine who is best equipped to speak authoritatively for that tradition.<sup>1</sup> No one perspective received enthusiastic acclaim.

In the context of such disagreement about identifying the distinguishing features in just one tradition among the six we are considering, skepticism about finding common features among them all seems wise. If it is so complicated to agree about the common defining features of a single South Asian tradition, how much more complicated must it be to deal with common elements in all six? Our determination to proceed with this project emerged slowly and only after we discovered in conversations with fellow authors in this volume that there seem to be basic common motifs, and that those motifs are possible to isolate and to analyze. In what we do here, we take refuge in the advice attributed to Alfred North Whitehead: "Seek simplicity and distrust it." At the least, our efforts may encourage our more cautious and specialized colleagues to ask larger, comparative questions about religion in South Asia. Perhaps, too, it will become obvious that elements of these traditions have been selectively dissolved in a historically, culturally, and geographically saturated solution, a solution that in turn seeps into and leaves its cumulative residue in unpredictable patterns on the traditions of which it is composed.

Our efforts to achieve a bigger picture might be regarded as premature or even foolhardy. Within and among these six traditions there is much that is dynamic and still changing. As readers will soon see, the "imported" traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism as described here respectively by Raj, Narayanan, and Goonasekera have had to accommodate to South Asian apprehensions of the supernatural in India and Sri Lanka. If it is true that travel changes people, the same can be said of religious traditions: when religious traditions travel, they must adapt to new contexts if they are to survive. Whether that adaptation achieves official opprobrium among authorities of that tradition is often an issue, and in all three of these described cases the official perspective taken toward certain kinds of religious vows is one of disapproval.

In short, culture and geography inevitably modify what traditions become and how they are practiced. From our perspective, the theme that emerges time after time in these essays is how a tradition learns to accommodate itself to changing circumstances, demands, and requirements. But more to the point, it is how faithful lay members of traditions will take steps to make a tradition meet and fit their own needs, often despite officially sanctioned instructions by the professional guardians of that tradition. Lay people will improvise on the traditions in many ways, but most spontaneously and effectively they do it by formulating and acting out religious vows.

Fenech and Singh discuss how vows have evolved into basic forms of ritual activity, even though there was no clear place for vows in the early Sikh

tradition or in the scripture. The same is true of Islam in Bangladesh, where Uddin remarks that at important Muslim shrines we can even find officially sanctioned signs posted that forbid the taking of vows, an alleged form of idolatry. And yet, undeterred, religious devotees proceed with their vows, taking little notice. Even in the Roman Catholic context of St. John de Britto's shrine, Raj notes that priests will have nothing to do with many specific ritual vows. Yet, the vows grow in importance at this shrine, attracting Hindu and Muslim worshippers as well. Processes acting upon these religions have been called many things: "indigenization," "acculturation," "accommodation," even "corruption." But they are real, and in many ways they account for the primacy of vows we see today in South Asia.

Generally speaking, the impetus and energy for changes, and particularly for the changes we describe here, do not come from the top down, from the professional religious leadership directing lay people to conform to institutional expectations. Most studies of vows in this volume concentrate on vows initiated by and taken by ordinary worshippers, the laity. These people take vows because they need to seize control of their own perceived spiritual and existential fates. Depending upon others—and especially upon the professional guardians of a tradition—is something they may have neither the time, the patience, nor the confidence to do. Going directly, without mediation, to what they believe to be the source and solution to their concerns is an act both of faith and of devoted daring.

Lay vows, then, are "unmediated and personal" (Christian 1981: 31–32).<sup>2</sup> They are "made inside oneself" and—like birthday cake wishes made before blowing out the candles—they are often not revealed to others until their fulfillment (Dubisch 1990: 126). But vows are more than this: they frequently involve an outward element that expresses, ritualizes, and sustains the interior dimension. Taking a ritual vow formally in the presence of your guru in which you declare your determination and intentions (see Lamb's chapter in this volume), offering a "down payment" in the temple to signify publicly a person's entering into a vow with Mariyamman (see Harman's chapter), and offering a written document (a *muri* or promissory note—see Raj's chapter) to a priest or the formal representative of a Catholic saint in order to receive a boon—all these are examples of the public dimensions of vows. In fact, some vows emphasize the public over the private, such as vows described by Fenech and Singh in the Khalsa Sikh community.

Public displays are basic to the vitality of the vow as a religious phenomenon, particularly in traditional and small-scale societies, where religion is "more outward than inward looking, more concerned with external images, with the public and communal than with the interior or the mystic." This is the realm where "morality is defined not so much by what one does as by whether others know about it" (Dubisch 1990: 129). Dubisch suggests that the emphasis on public manifestation and display of vows may "serve to mask the discrepancies that exist between popular and official interpretations" (131; see also Behar



1990: 103–6). In the South Asian context, vows reveal the tension between popular and official religions. The public displays of extreme physical hardship and spiritual endurance prominent in some South Asian vow performances seem even to strengthen participants' faith in the power and efficacy of the vow ritual. Spectacular fire-walking, tongue-piercing, hook-swinging, and baby auction rituals documented in this volume provide compelling and concrete South Asian examples. Conventional wisdom suggests that people do not willingly endure such physically and emotionally demanding tests unless reliable evidence—and traditional knowledge—confirms the efficacy and utility of such behavior.

As unmediated acts freely embraced and self-monitored by the laity, vows generally do not require or involve the participation of official ritual specialists either in their declaration or their execution. Nor do ritual specialists generally supervise or contribute to the efficacy of South Asian vows. Occasionally, and for ceremonial reasons, certain ritual specialists may be called upon to lend additional authority to the proceedings. This tends to be especially true when vow fulfillment assumes dramatic forms.<sup>3</sup> In certain situations, the presence of an official ritual specialist can be manipulated. In such cases the priest acts as a buffer providing official sanction and validation for an otherwise officially embarrassing ritual practice. This may help neutralize or nullify potential perceptions of deviation from orthodoxy. The blessing of a goat by a Catholic priest before its slaughter at Catholic shrines in south India is a common event and a case in point. The priest is no more than a silent and reluctant—frequently helpless and disapproving—spectator rather than an active participant since ritual leadership fully rests with the laity. This serves to reverse the structural hierarchy and traditional power relations (Bretell 1990: 68–73; Behar 1990: 96–106; Raj 2002: 50–55).<sup>4</sup>

A related feature of lay vows, particularly in South Asia, is their intrinsic informality, spontaneity, and flexibility. Institutional vows are usually solemn, public, and formal, but lay vows are informal and private. Lay vows couch in secrecy the intention of the person taking the vow. The nature of the informal vow, its stipulations, modality, locus, and execution are determined almost exclusively by the vow-taker and by her or his grasp of what local or family traditions demand. As such, lay vows are self-initiated and self-monitored. The devotee functions both as the agent taking the vow and as the authenticator of its having been suitably executed.

For the religiously and socially marginalized groups of South Asia—such as ascetics (see Lamb), women (see Kelting), and prostitutes (see Uddin)—vows can be undertaken without any official sanction and so act as the primary—if not the sole—means of access to supernatural powers. For others seeking not just divine gifts, but also official or popular approval, vows afford a public platform where the dramatic display of presumed personal piety and religious commitment heightens a person's prestige. As attested in McDaniel's recent study of Bengali women's vows in folk Hinduism, lay vows and vow stories serve as a

religious index and a barometer offering valuable clues to grassroots folk traditions, ethics, and worldview. McDaniel writes: “The *brata* [Bengali term for ‘vow’] stories provide models for ethics, compassion, and caring for others, making virtuous daughters and wives who fulfill the ideals of Hindu female behavior” (McDaniel 2003: xii).

The religious lives of devotees in much of South Asia are marked by a long series of seasonal and life-cycle rituals presumed appropriate for all people. Their timing and structure are determined by a person’s age, life stage, astrological charts, or the calendar. But the practice of taking and fulfilling vows is quite different. It is not bound by this cycle. In this sense vows become the most important way an individual takes charge of her or his religious life and so moves beyond this standard, impersonal, traditionally based ritual round onto which an individual’s spiritual journey is appended without any necessary reference to what the individual wants.

Given the variety and diffuse quality of this thing we call “the vow”, and for which there are hundreds of different words in the different language areas this volume represents, we once again emphasize that the sum total of what we are able to uncover about vows comes out of particular contexts. The rituals described here encompass a wide array of forms ranging from the repetition of simple prayers, to the offerings of money, hair, coconuts, silver and gold representations of body parts, as well as more arresting performance/offerings, such as demanding pilgrimages, animal sacrifices, fire-walking, hook-swinging, and tongue-piercing rituals. And some vows—none we will ever know about—are drenched in silence and secrecy made in the form of a private resolution, communicated with no one, and acted out in utter privacy. What provides coherence and unity to this rich panoply of ritual expressions is an indigenous South Asian strategy concerning human collaborations and interactions with sacred figures. These collaborations and interactions are intended to bring about either profit in this world or improved soteriological status vis-à-vis the sphere of the supernatural. Whether deities are helping folk in this world or whether folk are achieving enhanced status in the world of the deities, people are dealing with deities, and vice versa. This, then, is the essence of what we call “the deal with deities.”

This book would not exist if we did not believe that, in some measure, we have succeeded in finding some crucial commonalities among the traditions studied. In this effort, we want to concentrate on a single issue that appears consistently, indeed almost stubbornly. We have isolated the ritual activity of the vow as a basic aspect of how devotees in each of these traditions participate in religious activity. The practice of taking and acting on vows will not, of course, wholly circumscribe or define any single South Asian tradition. And yet, for a remarkable number of South Asian adherents, vows tend to be the primary and most accessible form of entry into a relationship with divine or, in some cases, demonic, powers. Immediate and unmediated access to the supernatural seems

to be most readily available to those willing to take vows to those powers. This theme appears time and time again in the essays included here. Some authors suggest more, in fact. Lamb, for example, asserts that among the Hindu ascetics of the Ramananda Sampraday, vows literally define the renunciant: they are, as he puts it, “what gives life meaning.” To be an ascetic, a person must take and perform specific monastic vows. Pechilis focuses on the vow as the very heart and soul of *bhakti*, or loving devotion, in Tamil Hinduism. She describes how the vow of dedication to a particular deity determines thenceforth the tenor and intensity of devotion in the life of a “god-lover” (*bhakta*). And in her moving description of the Hindu woman Shyamavati, whose faithful life of regular and devoted participation in specific cycles of women’s seasonal vows was shattered by a series of familial misfortunes, Pintchman indicates how severe disappointments can bring a woman to the brink of losing her faith. A loss of faith for Shyamavati meant ceasing to perform religious vows. Being religious for her is defined almost entirely by performing women’s religious vows.

If forsaking vows can be a visible indicator of moving away from a tradition, we can find a very different dynamic in Baumann’s description of how immigrant Sri Lankan Tamils reconstruct their identities as Hindus when they migrate to Germany. There, vows taken and observed during festival rituals are—aside from the construction of Hindu temples—one of the most assertive and visible ways these immigrant Hindus can claim and affirm their commitment to a tradition that risks being lost or forgotten in a new world. Taking vows to Hindu deities on German soil demonstrates and reinforces who these immigrants are—Tamil, Hindu, Sri Lankan, and yet German.

Vows in South Asia can, for selected devotees, constitute the core—and sometimes even the entirety—of how the nonprofessionally religious (the lay people) participate in their tradition. In other words, what makes them devoted and religious within a chosen tradition is the vows they take. They are religious because they take vows. Women in Hinduism (see Pintchman’s chapter), in Jainism (see Kelting’s chapter), and in Islam (see both Narayanan’s and Uddin’s chapters) gain access to the ritual activity and spiritual benefits of their respective traditions through the vows they take. Taking vows is their way of entering into a tradition where there are fewer ritual opportunities available to women to participate in their religion. So true is this of Hinduism that the major studies of vows in Hinduism have focused on the religious activities of women.

But if vows can provide a means of affirming a person’s membership and devotion to her own tradition, they can almost as easily act to do the opposite. They can, and do offer options to devotees to participate in religious traditions other than their own, formally outside their own. Vows not only reinforce your connections to your own tradition; they provide avenues for seeking assistance in other religious traditions, especially if you find that your own tradition is inadequate in certain circumstances.

Western sensibilities find this sometimes difficult to understand. Western monotheistic traditions are accustomed to the idea—and the practice—of mutually exclusive boundaries between religions; to the idea that a person must participate in only one religious tradition at a time. Normally, a bona fide Jew will not seek spiritual assistance in the formal activities of, say, Christianity, and vice versa. We have treated religious affiliation as a form of monogamy: being faithful to your tradition is as morally important as being faithful to your spouse. But the common folk among South Asian Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jains, and Christians don't understand religious adherence in such exclusive terms. They are willing on occasion to step outside their own traditions and to take vows in traditions and in sacred spaces to which they do not formally have an allegiance. Here we have what may be the most extraordinary feature of commonly practiced South Asian vow-taking. With a vow, a person can affirm her own official and traditional religious commitment and yet, on another day and in another circumstance, she can move entirely outside that commitment momentarily to marshal assistance from supernatural sources normally worshipped by members of another, different tradition.

The South Asian “investor” in the performance of vows understands spiritual capital a bit like an investor in the financial markets regards financial capital—diversifying your portfolio increases the probability of success and often minimizes the risks involved in depending on any single source for propitious results.<sup>5</sup> Taking vows to deities of a different tradition becomes a bit like investing spiritually in a hedge fund. It becomes a quick and easy way to supplement the resources—possibly the limited resources—that characterize your own religious tradition. Several authors in this volume note this dynamic: Raj, in particular, describes how Christians and Hindus share an ease and freedom in taking vows at each others' shrines and to each others' deities. Because specific shrines are specialized, some concentrating on fertility, others on specific kinds of healing, and still others on such matters as passing examinations or getting jobs, each particular shrine will attract takers of vows according to their needs rather than according to their traditionally religious affiliations. Harman notes that Christians, Muslims, and Hindus find in Mariyamman a powerful source of healing not readily available within the Christian and Islamic traditions. Hindus turn to the shrine of a great Muslim saint, as described so vividly in Narayanan's chapter. Similarly, Christians and Hindus turn to a Muslim dargah, or place of worship, in the religious context described by Uddin in Bangladesh. Goonasekera's chapter treats the compelling attraction the Buddhist shrine of Kataragama exerts on Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians, all of whom take vows there. And Kelting describes the ease of interplay between Jain and Hindu traditions. Since the great Jinas no longer respond to human requests, vows directed toward Hindu deities make ever more sense for Jain women.

In selecting the vow as a distinctive quality of religiosity in South Asian religions, we are not claiming that vows are inoperative in Western religious traditions. In their chapters, Harman and Pechilis both acknowledge that vows are found in several Western traditions. In fact, significant studies on Catholic vows in Spain, Portugal, France, and Ireland have recently appeared. In her study of popular religion in Europe, Ellen Badone has convincingly argued that the notions of equity, exchange, and reciprocity act as the governing principles of popular religion and the vow or promise serves as the “the primary means whereby individuals can establish a reciprocal relationship with divine figures” (1990: 16). Badone argues that devotees bind themselves to particular patron saints/deities with whom they seek to establish a special, reciprocal spiritual relationship and whose aid they seek in times of need and crisis. Scholars like Christian (1972, 1981) and Boissevain (1977) link this phenomenon of supernatural patronage to the patron–client relationships found in normal social interaction. Based on his study of Marian devotions in northern Spain, Christian maintains that “the human modes of exchange with divine figures (and ultimately, with God) parallel their modes of exchange with each other. The shrines are the major exchange centers where debts to the divine are paid” (Christian, 1972: xiii). “The different ways of communicating with the divine,” he continues, “and making bargains with the divine are related to the ways people arrange transactions with each other. Secular transactions of exchange can be arranged on a continuum from strict reciprocity to a kind of family communism”(168). In brief, when relating to the divine, humans replicate the norms and mechanics of social relations. These European studies parallel the religious dynamics and ritual patterns we detect in South Asian lay religion. Integral to the making and execution of vows is the sense of personal obligation, commitment, and indebtedness devotees express and manifest toward the deity. As Harman points out, the South Asian religious vocabulary, especially in Tamil, captures the notion that financial metaphors referring to “loans,” “debts,” and interest paid on a “loan” from a deity are quite common. The devotee pledges to undertake specific self-selected obligations until the request, or “loan,” is granted.<sup>6</sup> Once the request is fulfilled, the devotee is indebted to the deity according to the stipulations of the original agreement, or vow.

What we find less frequently in the West is South Asia’s remarkably widespread, short-term, practical, and utilitarian dependence on vows as a basic strategy for gaining temporary access to the supernatural for specific purposes. Still, other sorts of South Asian vows can be found. For example, the vows Pechilis attributes to bhaktas tend to be more like those found in the mainline Western traditions. The classical models for bhaktas (such as Manikkavacakar) become “god-lovers” for life. Their vows take on the gravity of a functional ordination. Similarly, Lamb’s ascetics take a vow to become Ramananda monks, but follow that vow with a series of very specific vows that define the parameters of the life

to which they are devoted—a combination of both the very diffuse and the very specific. And among the Khalsa Sikhs, vows focus less on an individual's supernatural needs and more on how a person seeks to become identified with the community, setting himself or herself apart from the non-Sikh population. There is a diffuse quality to the vow that presumes spiritual benefits for being inside rather than outside the Khalsa community.

For many devotees in South Asia, taking vows constitutes the full extent of religious belonging, though it is also true that those who opt for vows are likely to do so liberally, that is, to take concurrent or even serial vows in other traditions. At moments of need, South Asians may well regard distinctions between religious boundaries as fungible, arbitrary, often irrelevant. As Poincare is credited with saying, "It is the scale that makes the phenomenon." The sheer numbers of South Asians who take vows reveal that the vow is enormously influential and important to an understanding of South Asian religiosity. And it is this prodigious prevalence that leads us to propose that in its South Asian context—more so than anywhere else—the vow provides a comprehensible and comprehensive way to begin looking at religion in this part of the world.

Though we believe that the religious vow in South Asia is likely to have a more utilitarian and goal-directed focus, we need also to indicate that taking vows—especially vows to deities outside of your own tradition—involves a certain amount of time, dedication, concentration, and even spiritual preparation. No matter from which tradition a person approaches a supernatural figure, that supernatural figure is commonly portrayed as having a unique "personality." Each will have distinctive iconographic forms, specific narrative histories—whether written or oral—and traditionally transmitted preferences for certain kinds of gifts or offerings. Deities tend to be offended by specific kinds of conduct, and they have the ability to grant a range of boons. They have their unique abilities and talents and are understood to be able to grant only specific kinds of requests. It therefore follows that it pays for a devotee to know well the deity with whom she or he is dealing. Before assuming a vow, preparations are usually necessary. A person must become informed about habits and characteristics of the supernatural power involved. To perform the attendant rituals properly, the devotee must learn what offerings and rituals are appropriate. For some supernaturals, the offering of sacrificial meat is quite appropriate; for others it would constitute a severe offense. Performing a vow often involves prescribed preparatory periods of ritual fasting, sexual abstinence, and ascetic exercises.

All well and good: having suggested the prevalence, flexibility, appeal, and utilitarian character of the vow in South Asia, we will likely be expected to address the question, What is a "vow," exactly? Because no definition of "vow" was imposed on our authors when we made plans for this volume, readers will discover that several scholars here have offered their own conceptions of what

a vow is and what it does. We object to none, but endorse none exclusively. A word's meaning can be deduced only after a scrutiny of the variety of contexts in which it is used. With this in mind, we want initially to direct your attention to the remarkable essays in this volume. These essays emerge out of the community and context each author studies. Harman, for example, emphasizes the process of negotiation in vow-taking, showing how vows can be utilitarian instruments to which people resort in requesting a boon from the Goddess. They do so by offering the Goddess something they have—money, ritual activity, devotion, service, a willingness to undergo pain—in return for assistance from the Goddess. It is a business deal and, once concluded or “paid off,” potentially finishes the relationship between Goddess and worshipper.

Whitney Kelting's study of vows among Jains suggests that the sort of vows about which Harman writes are only half the story. Like the vows to Mariyamman, certain vows taken by Jain women are intended for familial well-being, prosperity, and protection. These vows are frequently directed to Hindu deities or to guardian deities. But vows directed to the Jinas, those enlightened beings who have transcended this world of rebirth, are nontransactional vows. No negotiation is involved. Vows do not effect the Jinas and no response is expected. Rather, the vows are more diffuse and are intended for “karma reduction,” that is, for liberating the soul from attachment to this life of rebirth and passion.

In her treatment of bhakti, Pechilis adds another dimension to how vows might be understood: she emphasizes the unpredictability of human life and the importance of making commitments in the face of that unpredictability. A vow becomes a defiant affirmation, a declaration of assertion and confidence in the face of chaos, a commitment to structure in a world that to the faithless eye seems all too unstructured. She notes further that vows can be short-term or long-term; or they can be vows of acquisition (the utilitarian sort) or vows of maintenance. And finally, vows can set a person apart from the social world or place a person squarely in it as a result of specific commitments.

Possibly the best illustration of the long-term maintenance vows can be found in the chapter by Lamb. Ascetics should begin taking vows within a few months after their initiation, and their vows are generally not for the acquisition of worldly things such as health or wealth, but rather for more abstract, diffuse gifts such as liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth or unwavering devotion to their deity. The vows of this sort tend to impose some sort of discipline or sensory deprivation, including food restrictions. The determined pursuit of monastic vows and the spectacular nature of certain disciplines chosen constitute for these monk-ascetics both a reverence and an identity quite set apart in the Hindu tradition.

The maintenance vows of the Jain and Hindu traditions are, it seems, quite foreign to vows found in Christianity and Islam. The soteriology of neither of