

THE KARMA BAZAAR

Other books by Erika Mumford:

The Door in the Forest

Willow Water

THE KARMA BAZAAR

poems by
Erika Mumford

Taylor's Point Press

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To

Carol Parikh,
with whom so many of these poems were shared,

Sundari Seshadri,
who first showed me India,

Shashiben Parikh,
who helped me try to understand it,

and Suchitra Mumford,
whose first home it was,

this book is lovingly dedicated.

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*Best Mother, best of Rivers,
best of Goddesses . . .*

from the Vedic Hymn to Saraswati,
Goddess of Poetry and Music.

This book grew out of two years' experience
living and travelling in India.

I.

TAKE NOTHING OUT

Pierre Loti Visits The Maharajah Of Travancore

The country-side reminded him of France.
But dawns were different:
lodged in a European guest house,
he woke each morning to the clamor of crows.
"They infest India" he wrote.
But he welcomed the sparrows, so surprisingly
like home, who hopped in and out of his room,
pecking rice from his table.

When at last the maharajah summoned him,
it was to talk of Europe.
The maharani, splendid
in silks like crinkled poppy petals,
wished only to hear of styles and carriages.
He recorded sadly
that even had they desired to speak
of those spiritual things he thirsted for
his interpreter would not have known
the French words.

The maharajah
sent the royal musicians to the guest house
with *veenas* and *tamburas* carved from gourds,
and small, oiled drums.
"Harsh and monotonous"
the good Abbé du Bois had written,
"but let us remember, the heathen
has not our sensibilities".

The maharajah's guest
waited attentively before the "huge guitars
and tom-toms". When the music started
almost inaudibly, he was astonished,

having expected noise. Notes droned and slid,
too alien to grasp.

At last he thought
that these most subtle modulations
expressed all that the maharajah might have said.

He took no pleasure in a music
that lacked all harmonies,
but thought he could discern a pattern.
The singing, "strange and rare", moved him.
It seemed unbearably sad.
But halfway through the concert
a page announced "the elephant is here".
Fearing to bore his guest, the maharajah
had ordered a diversion.

The bewildered foreigner
mounted the great beast's trunk
with the drone of *veena* and *mridangam*
still sounding in his ears. He was borne, swaying,
outside the landscaped grounds. Monkeys
skipped before him. The sun beat down.
Beyond the palace crashed the desolate sea.
And nothing now reminded him of home.

Bombay Notebook

We step from the plane into tropical night.
The smell - of what? Spice, urine, incense,
Smoke - is a presence, harsh as the sight

Of shrouded, sleeping forms: essence
At first, of Bombay. For weeks I am ill
With fever, nausea, a piercing sense

Of exile. What had I thought to feel
For the ragpicker, the lame
Woman whose fingerless hands hold

A large-headed, silent baby? Ashamed,
I empty my purse. *Don't touch me,*
Don't make me look. It's I who's maimed.

Househunting, the first flat we see
Is full of crows, preening their glistening rags
On the rosewood screen and damask settee.

We find an apartment and the weather changes.
My vision clears. In the monsoon-rinsed air
The bitter scent's of home. The leper who drags

Smiling, after me, lives next door
In Gitanagar "The Place of Song"
Patched of sacking and tin and paper,

And she and I begin a long
Wordless acquaintance. My friend Sundari
Lends me a rough black grinding stone.

We engage a teacher of Hindi.
And as I struggle to form the letters
Or to hear four indistinguishable sounds of *d*

I think how nothing in my alphabet
Has prepared me to say
The thousand names of Brahma, or to write,

Correctly, "naked, the pilgrim goes his way."

Take Nothing Out: for Shashiben

From the edge of Bhuleshwar
where even the gods
lose themselves
we looked back.
But the scent of jasmine
beckoned us from Phulgal,
Lane of Flowers, and the alleys
swallowed us.

A web of streets led
to courtyards within courtyards, overhung
by wooden balconies
where laundry fluttered. Cows
brushed past tiny stalls, heaped
with eggplants. Bangle sellers
held out fragile wares, and pilgrims,
leaning on their staffs, watched us
through the doors of painted temples.

We refused no one,
we gave alms to beggars, and bargained
for curious purchases: apples of Sita,
a red clay water pot,
a sieve, an iron saucer
for frying seeds.
A grinning old woman
sold us flesh-colored fingers of turmeric
and a bunch of channa peas, torn up
by the roots.

Clutching these talismans, the apple
sweet in our mouths,
we found the way out of Bhuleshwar.
But the things I brought from there
refused to thrive. The clay pot leaked,

the sieve held water. I spat out
bitter mouthfuls of turmeric,
and the channa, fried in my saucer, tasted
of burnt hair.

People go there for bargains: wedding
flowers, peas and beans, food
for the dead. Next time
in the lanes of Bhuleshwar,
I will braid my hair with jasmine
and feed channa
to the silent cows. The old woman
watching me will see
I take nothing out.

Children Of The Bazaar

Conspicuous as a ghost
I trail my shopping basket
through the bazaar. Stunted children
touch my pale arms, stroke
my skirt. *Ma, ma*
they cry like lambs,
pointing to blistered mouths. I scatter
small coins, oranges.

In the airy flat, visited
by sparrows who pick
every crumb from my floor,
I boil water,
drop in iodine. I wash
and wash the vegetables. Sweat
gathers in my pores,
scalds my eyes.

In The Hospital: for Jeremy

Crouched on the edge
of your hospital bed
I gathered your small hot body
into my arms. I would not let you
slide away from me. You asked,
are you smiling? And, tears
dropping on your hair, I said
don't you hear the smile in my voice?

Just days ago, you had written "Here
the people are so poor and
the dogs are so unwell fed. If I ever
see anyone unwell fed or
someone poor at dinner or lunch
even if I eat anything I feel so
sick. And I feel so sad too.
In Bombay so many beggars come to us
for money but only sometimes
we give them money. And
the dogs are very sad too."

Today, in the joy of your recovery,
I come across these words
and I relive
your illness. When I
went home and stripped your bed
tearing the sheet in my haste:
lest I should see
the imprint of your head,
afterwards.

Gold Bangles: for Suchitra

It is twelve years since I first put on
these bangles. Circles
of yellow Indian gold,
they bruised the bones of my hand
as I pulled them on.
I sleep in them: my husband
can tell my mood
from the sound of my bangles
in the dark.

No ornaments, they are
like hair or fingernails part
of my body.
One has a raised design
or spell. The other
is plain, and dented
by my children's teeth.

Daughter, on your wedding day
I will put golden bangles
on your wrists. Gold
to keep you from want
in strangers' houses, and
for beauty: lying down naked
as on the night you were born,
you shall wear upon your dark skin
gold from this distant country
of your birth.

Sundari, Singing

You, tuning your tambura,
pause to tell me
how long ago, at home
your grandfather would rouse you
to learn the night-time ragas, while your sister
slept, and the water-buffalo
stirred, chewed its cud, and slept, the stars
fading, your voice
finding the colors of night:

Hillola, sung at midnight,
"a fawn-like woman moving slowly";
Kausika, "perfumed with saffron", and *Lalita*
"rising from her bed to greet the dawn".
Above the drone of his tambura
your grandfather made you sing them
again and again. If not sung well, he told you,
ragas and their raginis suffer
like injured men and women.

You learned to live by rhythms
more intricate than blood and breath mark out. But time
caught up with you. Your sister
married for love. Your husband chose you
whose name means *beautiful*, for music.
Yet when you rise at night
it is to calm a child, or set
the lentils soaking.

But sometimes you take down
your grandfather's tambura from the shelf
and tune the jangled strings. The polished gourd-shape
still gleams, the ivory vine
still twines unbroken round the neck.
Then, kneeling barefoot on the floor,
veiled by your hair,
you summon up those august presences
the ragas.

In Benares

You follow the bicycle bells, follow the red-eared cow, the street named Bliss to Aces New Deal Hotel: A cool, dim archway, some rickety tables. The smiling host serves tea in a cracked porcelain cup, watches with folded arms as you go through the arch. Expecting a courtyard, you step into a field of corn, green tassels nodding above your head. Beyond the field, a white temple. You are given a cell-like room, a bed narrow as a shelf. Mornings you go to the river, watch the rapt old men with plastic shopping baskets full of water-jars, brass boxes, little whisks. No one notices you, you have become, at last, invisible. One day you wander up the river-stairs into a warren of alleys just wide enough for you. Iron-studded doors bar your way, windows stare past you. The streets curve and branch like a great banyan tree. Each fork ends at a little shrine, a crumbling elephant-god, a garlanded stone. Children flit by, vanish up twisting stairs. Hours pass. Suddenly a young man with a briefcase emerges through a carved door, mounts a bicycle. You follow, running, ducking through archways, nearly lose him among water- buffalo, then burst into the thoroughfare. You look back. The entrance has sealed itself. At Aces New Deal Hotel the host rubs his plump hands, brings a fresh pot of tea. The priest from the temple hangs his black umbrella on a stone lotus, comes through the corn to sprinkle you with Ganges water and auspicious rice.

Casting The Images Into The River

*At the end of the nine-day Durga
Festival in Benares, the images,
from whom the goddess has
departed, are thrown into the
sacred River Ganges.*

The Goddess Durga
rides through the city, spear poised
at the demon's heart.
Tumblers, dancers,
flutes and drums
bring down to the river
the life-sized idols in their glittering robes,
jewels at wrist and throat.

Boats wait, ringed
with lights, to row
the images into deep water.
From silt-washed stairs
children send paper rafts with lighted candles
bobbing and whirling down the stream.

We crowd into a heavy, black-prowed boat
with other watchers. But the boatman
nudges the craft
away from the throng, the images,
the wailing flutes,
past shadowy ghats, ashen remains of pyres,
past crumbling walls with pillared balconies
that once housed rajahs.

The Ganges widens, swift
and black. The oarsman
rows hard against the current,
and drops of sacred water splash our hands.
We wipe them, secretly, against our clothes.

A dark, lop-sided rowboat
crosses our bow,
makes for the opposite shore with muffled strokes.
Inside, drenched glistening skirts,
a bangle-circled arm, a drowned thing
lies across the thwarts.
Salvage, theft, ritual,
the oarsman hooded in darkness
gives no sign. Our fellow passengers
seem not to see.
And no one speaks.

Our boatman turns, we drift,
the river taking us,
and we, my friend and I,
fall fast asleep and have to be awakened
when it is time to pay
and go ashore.

The crowd
is denser than before, the night more frantic.
Jostled and pushed along the road
we talk uneasily
of what we were not shown
and what we were. The moon
cuts from each boat a wavering shadow,
and still the images
come to be drowned.

Thieves

In Benares the monkeys
tumble from roof to roof,
hunch deep in thought,
cuddle and slap their babies.
Children in cloud-gray fur
prance around old males,
leap across the alley
to shake the grating on my window.

The nightwatchman
heaves rubble at them,
drives them off to sleep on other housetops.
He lives in a hut on the roof
where I see his oil lamp flickering,
see him turning
the pages of a magazine.

Next morning
the monkeys are back
fingering loot: my shower cap,
an Air India spoon,
my blue plastic soap dish
from a hole in the bathroom wall.

Their black leather hands
caress the treasures, they smack their lips
over the Pears' soap. Soon
all will lie forgotten in the gutter,
and the nightwatchman
will have a beautiful blue soap dish,
a foreign, rainproof hat,
a stolen spoon.

A Bowl From Kathmandu

I am holding a bowl
made from a human skull.
Edged in silver, it gleams
with the lustre of old ivory.
My friend and I
stare at one another across its rim.

An aging lama
willed it to him
for teas of healing or of ill.
Roots and blossoms
from the slopes of the Himalayas
hang in twisted bunches from the rafters.

He warns me
there is power in it:
a small black hole
shows where, in meditation
a spiritual light was focused, so intense
it burned the bone.

who would dare
use such a cup? Weeks later
my fingers curve in dream
around that smooth, pale weight,
the bones perfectly fused
at their dark edges.

The lama's bowl
woke an ancient thirst.
I need to hold it again, feel
the light-struck crown
of the skull,
drink what fills it.

Black Fire

Madam, this is a prayer-ring from Tibet:
a tiny bell to rouse the god,
three silver thunderbolts,
seven grains of gold. And in the center,
see, an emerald,
lightless, dark ...

I had it from a lama's *chela*
whose master sent him to buy food.
Here there are many beggars from the hills.
You will prefer this bracelet, Madam,
of filigree and pearls.

But I had seen those hills, the Himalayas,
lit by sunset. On a crag
a windswept lamasery
glowed red and ivory against the night.
Flags flickered from each spire.
The same fierce breath that turned the mantra-wheels
tossed my loose hair.

I made the dealer cut the circle
to fit my finger. Twice I dreamed
I must translate
an ancient Sanskrit spell. An old man stares
into a begging-bowl.
Sometimes, in a cold northern light
the emerald's black surface
flashes green
as though a mountain well
were struck by thunder, or the lama's ring
by prayer.

Stopping On The Way To Badrinath

What was somehow sad about Yogimath
Was that it was merely a drab way-station,
A cross-roads, not anyone's destination.

At sunset I climbed a thorny path
Past goats into the nearer hills.
The air was clangorous with bells

And with the unearthly rise and fall
Of the chanting of worshippers: out of the bus,
Where they had chattered like tourists, like us,

They headed straight for the nearest temple,
Safe in their pilgrimage. And I
Who wore no one's amulet - my way

Skirted a dangerous nearness to - what?
I had felt it shivering on the ghat
River-washed in Benares: a sense

Of gathering light, the crystal core
Of an almost visible energy. Here
It was something to do with a mountain presence;

Perhaps the Himalayas themselves
Are what is meant by the gods. Veils
Of ice-penumbra sweep their sides

- Or stifling avalanche shroud. In his pride
A British climber christened his child
Nanda Devi. At twenty the mountain took her,

Rolled her up in a roaring, wild
Tantrum of snow and scree, then shook her
Free of its shoulder.

My winding trail
Gleamed past foothills black in the fall
Of ambiguous light.

Had I stayed too late?
I ran down the goat-path back to town,
To the mud-walled hostel set in a hill,

The room lit by a single brown
Candle stuck on the windowsill,
And filled with the sound of chanting, still.

Ritual Bath

In Badrinath, on the roof of the world,
I woke to Sanskrit chanting before dawn.
Shri Badrinath Vishvambaram,
Lord of the world, the pilgrims sang,
and in the corridor the water seller's
garam pani, garam pani mingled with the hymn.

In the shadowy bath house
steam billowed, thick and yellow: fumes
of salt and brimstone.
Other women, blurred bending shapes,
dipped water over breasts and arms,
wrung out long hair.
The names of God
fell in a rain of blessings on the town.

The spring
hot from earth's belly, took me in
past all shape-shifts of memory.
Shedding spent lives
like clothes at the stone rim,
I sank. The pool
closed over me.

Seeing The God

At the temple door
we pause. An old man beckons:
Come, sisters, come. The god is great.
Canopied in gold, the inner shrine
glitters with gems and silver, dazzles us
as we search
for the black basalt image.

The pilgrims' guidebook says
whoever sees Lord Badrinath,
from his diadem to his holy feet,
will gain release from life and death.
We can't decide
if what we see in the distance is the god
or only a dark, accidental
gap between lamps, garlands,
cloth of gold.

We never asked
release from birth and death,
but only that the world should come to us
again and again; that we
try on the masks of men and animals,
of pilgrims, wizards, whores,
of crows and dolphins.
The old man whispers, *say*
the god is great.

We join our palms,
offer some coins and flowers, turn
to go. Outside,
the marble bull of the god Shiva kneels,
his testicles smeared with saffron
by pious wives. And from a niche in the wall
a blood-red face
with river-pebble eyes and a slit mouth
smiles,
sacred, terrible.

On The Mountain

i.

Behind the shoulder of a hill,
a shrine: shelter of rock housing a rock,
a rough, unhewn, unhuman god.

On this plateau
where every spring is holy
and the great peaks are goddesses

- murderous Nanda Devi, Annapurna -
some shepherd lured a mountain presence
to watch the desolate slope, this path.

I stop to catch my breath,
and see, among my footprints,
clusters of fleshy leaves

and a white velvet star-shape, hidden
by scree and thistle
from my casual glance. I lay a handful

of blossoms and some pebbles of veined quartz
before the imageless god: like offering
the mountain to itself,

like offering myself
- made in what likeness -
to the cold notice of the mountain.

ii.

Five rivers
flow from a single spring: lost
in their blue valleys,
their source guarded by an old temple
deep in the mountains.

It houses the spring,
houses roots and decaying leaves,
snakes and secrets: at my coming
a yogi wearing saffron robes
slips out the door and disappears
behind the cremation-ground. His sandals
lie abandoned on the threshold.

I kneel,
catch a trickle of icy water
from the mouth of a stone cow.
Through the dark doorway of the inner shrine
a basalt phallus, black as satin, rises
from frangipani blossoms: the dwelling
of Shiva the Ambiguous.

I had not meant
to cross his path: masked in skin, waiting
behind the cremation-ground. Cold
and slow as a snake, I turn
and follow the smallest river
down the gorge.
Thorn bushes part for me, the hum of bees
shields me
like a mantra.

Chrysanthemums

Even the crows were quiet
as we climbed down crumbling stairs
to the old temple pool: water,
you said, smiling,
from far-off Ganga, a miracle.
Goats browsed on tufts of weeds
in the cracked steps.
A small boy swam
in the greenish water, and sages,
their gravestones leaning up against each other,
whispered under the dry grass
by the shrine.

The gods' fierce black and silver dolls
roused to bells, the clink of coins.
Barefoot on holy ground
we held out our cupped hands, received
chrysanthemums sprinkled
with rice and ghee: gifts
for a journey.

We took the long way back,
past the cremation ground
at the sea's edge.
The world at mid-day hung suspended
on God's held breath. At last
the screech of crows among the tamarisks
the roar of buses
returned us to the world. I discovered
my wallet gone.

Religion is given for fools, said your brother
as he lent me the bus fare home.
But I still had the blossoms
wrapped in my handkerchief:
purple flowers of Shiva
glowing on my windowsill,
and the wise ants taking the rice away
grain by grain.

Annapurna

I cook beneath
the measuring eye
of a diminutive
bronze goddess
sitting in judgment, a spoon
across her knees. Annapurna,
Food-giver, sari stained
with turmeric and ghee,
your ladle is ready
to dish up
the lentils or rap my
knuckles. I dare not scorch the
rice, and throwing out the leftovers
I turn my back: knowing that you see
when the potatoes are too thickly peeled,
or spinach grows slimy in the refrigerator.
You teach the ritual of curd, the sacrifice
of flesh and fish.

Bless
my oils and herbs,
my pots and skillets, my
sharp knives, Mother-in-law!

Alex Taylor's Cup

My measuring cup
is a tin mug, found
in a heap of broken forks
and bottles, in the Maine woods:
old Alex Taylor's, who owned the land,
and used to feed the truants
who came to swim. Tossing the dirty plates
under his bed till they were needed again.

He'd have liked his cup
to travel so far,
and I took it with me to India
though its bottom is round and wobbly.
My Indian ayah can't believe
that this dented old thing is American. She drinks
her tea from it, thinking it
the humblest cup in my house.

I tell her I don't care
what she drinks from, just so
my measuring cup isn't half full of tea
when I need it. She has no use
for measuring cups. She cooks
by eye and handful, the way
her mother taught her.

And every day she boils
her strong, sweet, milky tea,
and sits on my kitchen floor to drink
from Alex Taylor's cup. It has become
hers, and when I leave
she shall have it.
I think old Alex would enjoy
the thought of his measuring cup
in its place in Moti's shack
beside the dabbas and kathoris
and the thalis and the great black
grinding stone.

The Welcome

At Chingelput station
the dust of the South stings our eyes,
coats our lips. Clothes wrinkle,
stick to the backs of our legs. Our friend
has sent his son to meet us, diamonds
sparkling in his earlobes. Humbly,
like poor relations
we enter the house
of the rich Brahmin.

The family has gathered.
Radha, the young bride,
pours water for us, holds out towels,
brings buttermilk in fluted cups.
She leads me by the hand to a carved chest.
Emeralds, diamonds, sapphires, rubies, pearls
spill from velvet boxes
into my lap: the five stones of good fortune
set in gold so pure a thumb can dent it.

It is not enough that I admire.
She must dress me,
first in a gold-bordered sari,
then in her dowry. Her small fingers
clasp bracelets and chains
around my throat and wrists, she pins up
my dusty hair with emeralds.
She dips her finger in vermilion *kumkum*
and presses it against my forehead.

Like the milkmaid in the legend
I am transformed into a ranee
for the day. I sway as I move
beneath the heavy folds of silk.
The air is rich with spices. We eat,
from great banana leaves laid
on the clean stone floor,

fiery *sambhar* and rice, cucumbers
laced with coriander. Smooth curds
run down our fingertips, soothe
our burning throats.

When we leave,
it is with ceremony: escorted
to the train, the family standing around us
to shield us from beggars and the stares
of the curious. Mangoes and coconuts
in string bags,
and the traditional gifts
to a departing guest:
a mirror, a box of *kumkum*, a length of cloth.

Three gifts, three emblems. As all welcome,
and guest, and host, are emblems. For who knows,
merchant, tramp, foreigner, in what disguise
a god may come?

Holding the mirror in the palm of my hand
as the train speeds across the subcontinent,
I drape the blouse-piece over my shoulder,
touch the mark on my brow.

II.

THE COUNTRY BETWEEN BIRTHS

Taking The Waters

The bus that takes away
the morning's fish
brings the old women.

Tucking up green and purple saris
they wade into the sea like iridescent fish-crows
and settle themselves in the foam.

Black-eyed granddaughters
pour water over them from brass jars
to cool the brain,

while they cackle and splash,
plan weddings, cremations,
lyings-in, among the waves.

Sand shifts, and tickles
their haunches. Minnows
wiggle into their saris as into seaweed.

Riding home in the bus,
wrapped in streaming grey hair
that smells of crab and iodine

they feel the sluggish blood
pulse thinner, more wicked: ancient Aphrodites,
licking salt from their thumbs.

Yogeshwari Cave

*This cave temple is located
on the outskirts of Bombay. I
have imagined it as a kind of
limbo between incarnations.*

This is the cave
that leads to the country between births.
One by one the children find it,
climbing barefoot down the earthen stairs.
Stone doorkeepers, eroded leper-like, admit them
to Shiva's temple in the living rock.

Fire flickers in the dark, where pilgrims
are cooking their evening meal.
Above black marigolds
the pillar that houses the god
gleams wet; a spring
visits the cave in a rush of water.
The children cup their hands
and drink.

They follow the stream
into a narrow cleft
till only the smallest can stand upright.
The water leads them to a mossy chamber
where Grandmother Uma has prepared a feast
of saffron rice and ghee. A guardian
lies fast asleep across the threshold.

The children tiptoe in, and begin
to nibble the fragrant grains.
Their cheeks grow waxy plump, already
they are forgetting their mothers,
their huts, the scratching chickens,
the film song blaring from across the alley.
Soon they too will sleep, their eyelids
laden as coins.

Deep in Yogeshwari Cave
Grandmother Uma stirs the pot
that never empties. But the children
returning again and again
and always leaving
will remember nothing of the country between births,
unless it is the crocus scent of saffron
suddenly in the poor hovel
like grains of gold.

Water Seller

At dawn beside a shallow sea
pregnant Savriti leaves her house
of thatch and cardboard. Palms
snake upward, yellow trumpet flowers
surround an elephant-headed god.
Savriti in a crimson skirt
carries brass jars of water on her head
from house to house. Her child
shifts in the womb, she sways,
her bare feet grasp the earth
like fists. The air is hot as blood.
Huge as mirages, supertankers march
in line on the horizon
and in the green lagoon amongst the slime
a flock of herons drifts,
souls born in bliss, ice-white
and pure as bandages.

At The Orphanage: The Armless Girl

We sat in a circle on the floor
and a foreign lady
gave us biscuits. The others
put their hands together and said
Namasté, Memsahib.
Ayah crumbled some pieces of biscuit
and put them in my mouth.

The lady dropped a red ball on the floor.
Ayah said, *play with it, ungrateful owls,*
or memsahib will be angry. But no one
knew what to do. And the lady
took our picture
sitting beside the ball.

When she started to leave,
Priya held out her arms
and cried until the memsahib
picked her up. And all of us
cried to be picked up.
Then I felt my lost arms
tugging at me
from the place before I was born.

Temple Carving

From crooked gutters
where huts of tin and sacking
lean against each other like tired children
incense rises up to Lakshmi.
Her name is smooth as almond oil
on tongues parched
for water,
that whisper without hope
I wish, I wish.

Lakshmi is floating
in a disarray of lotus petals
on the Eternal Sea. Lord Vishnu
has cupped his hand
around her naked breast,
her jasmine-scented fingers trace
the outline of his thigh. Ten centuries
will pass before she sinks back, satisfied,
and, breathing in the incense, murmurs
granted.

Djinns

In little shops
illuminated like stages,
men are taking evening tea.
The perfume seller beside the mosque
is closing his stall
where sweet scents drift and hover,
djinnns freed from their bottles
into the stale air.

Night, black as bombazine,
drops down. The djinnns prowl the streets,
seeking the unsatisfied.
The men around the bootleg fenni-seller
begin to murmur
of black gold in Kuwait, lateen-rigged sails
in secret harbors, watches
sewn into ragged sleeves.
Crows, roosting in treetops, jeer.

The perfume seller
lifts the edge of his robe
out of the dirt as he walks. A paper bag
holds the day's profits. He wishes
for mutton kebabs in curds, and a girl
that glows beneath her veils
like a rubbed lamp. Tonight
he will sleep content. Tomorrow
he will conjure back
to their translucent leather flasks
Ruh Khus and Gul Mohar
and Damask Rose, his unquiet servants.

In The Karma Bazaar

I should have run to you, Mother,
when his hand touched my shoulder. Stained fingers,
cracked long nails that scratched my skin.
Was it his eyes, the promise of a creature masked
that bound me? More intimate
than my own self, my familiar from childhood.
Yet I bite my hair to keep from crying out
when I glimpse you
still searching for me in the bazaar.

I saw you again, today.
You went from stall to stall,
your mouth moving, your hands
making their hopeless gestures.
The henna merchant went on polishing
his jars. The fortune teller squatting on the pavement
spat over her shoulder. *Nahi Memsahib*,
they all said. *Nahi*, said the ragged boys standing around.
The hunchback who sells love powders and human hair
offered to buy your braid.

Weeping, you went on
toward the shops where they sell
rabbits and song birds in wicker cages.
You passed so close
I could have tugged your skirt.
Crouched in the painted doorway
where we whisper our bargains
to those desperate enough to seek us out
I held my veil closed. Already he has threatened
to sell me
or set me free.

Grandmother

Until the baby came
I closed my heart against his mother,
that foreign bride my son brought home.
I had wanted a fawn-dark girl
who would rub my stiff legs
with supple fingers
and cover her head with her veil.

But after his birth
I washed his mother's hair,
touching, for the first time, the smooth
fair strands, the ivory forehead.
I sent to the bazaar
for lemons and camomile,
and her braids glowed on her breast
like golden chains.

Now the child follows me to the well,
or when I take flowers
to the gods. I fold his small brown hands
and no one in the temple
can guess
that his mother is foreign.
He bows before the god
like any Indian child.

My daughter-in-law
is pregnant again, and my son
coaxes her with grapes, and almond curd.
Because she calls me Mother
I disguise
my fear of the invisible
forming in her white body:
buds of fingers perhaps this time
pale like hers, hair
already yellowing, and those unnatural
blue eyes.

A Woman Of Mithila

A small girl, I knelt
over scraps of paper,
and drew the gods
as my mother taught me:
blue Krishna, holding a flute,
and the lovers, Rama and Sita.
My ink was soot, my brush
threads plucked from my sari.

When a man was chosen for me
I lifted my eyes and saw
the god in him. Curls
of night-black hair on his nape.
Thin fingers that could coax
a lizard from its stone.
I ground bright earths for paint,
powdered sandalwood and pollen,
mixed them with goat's milk.
I gave him a comb
wrapped in a picture of serpents and stars.

Now the moon is in her last phase
and I have started to paint
on the wall of our home
the ancient wedding spell: on a field
the color of blood, a lotus unfolds its petals, pierced
by a slender shaft: the god and goddess. It does not matter
that the wall will be washed, the colors fade.
For four nights
while the ashes of our marriage fire grow pale
my love and I will sleep in these red fields of god,
chaste and burning as stars. Then we will dance
to the music
of his flute.

Entertainer

I shake my ankle bells, I call
the god. Blood-red
my sari whirls to sculptured stillness.
My hands spell out
Fear not. Knives gleam
where diners put them down. Applause.

The holy ground of Shiva, Lord of Dance,
fades as the music ends. No pilgrims come
to this round dancing floor
that shines like a black moon,

but foreigners
drive up in limousines
to eat spiced food from silver thalis
and take in
the show: my eloquent hands.
Authentic art from temples on the walls.
Fear not. The moon
glitters on my Beloved's forehead.
Death of the Universe
He calls this dance.

The Embodiment: Six Ghazals

*"Every nineteen years the images
of the gods are replaced in a rite
called the 'New Embodiment'.
Taking a primary role are the
Temple servants, called daitas"
-- Diana Eck, Darsan*

i.

*The daita enters the forest
Looking for the one auspicious tree.*

In dream I looked into my mirror
And saw the cloud-blue, blind, third eye.

Dead stars, their light
Reels toward me through black sky.

On a milkweed stalk, a cocoon.
"We know what we are, but know not what we may be."

Who can tell the servant from the lover?
All are actors in the play.

ii.

*He finds the tree.
He scatters seeds at its foot.*

We recognize the signs,
An alphabet imprinted on our thought.

These rouse the sleeping reptile brain:
Flute's breath, musk, stamp of a dancing foot.

The whirling, many-armed god
Wears blossom, blade, green shoot.

Stay indoors, whet the scythe.
In blood-stained ground seeds take root.

iii.

*The daita prays to the tree spirits
And asks them to leave in peace.*

Whose words buzz in and out?
Honey fills the tree, scents the leaves.

This morning's anger:
Gone without a trace.

Three useless things:
A mirror, watch and keys.

Sometimes our spirit is used elsewhere.
Where I am is emptiness.

iv.

*The daita cuts down the tree
And begins to carve the god.*

The morning is blank and bright as new paper.
I study the calligraphy of cloud.

My hand finds the wood's grain.
Give me the tools I need.

If my mind were a shaft of diamond;
If blue flame blazed on your forehead.

When did the sun set? Time
Was all we had.

The cocoon has grown transparent.
I see the jewelled imago in its pod.

v.

*Blindfolded, with bandaged hands
He puts a scroll into the finished carving.*

This blue-green eggshell
Compresses beak, heart, poised wing.

I trace the name
Under the adderwort's tongue.

On the page, loops and spirals,
The code flowers into meaning.

Is it fire, is it a word?
Cold underground spring?

Even a dung-beetle.
Even earth-star, lichen.

vi.

*The temple priest
Paints in the new god's eyes.*

I fell asleep.
Who brought me to this place?

If the third eye opens
It will burn away the universe.

Already the sky is on fire
With black and orange butterflies.

Will I know you
When the mask drops from your face?

III.

ASHRAM IN PANDUKESHWAR

Ashram In Pandukeshwar: for Carol

*We have gone as far into the mountains
as we can. Here the road
becomes a snow-swept track
that leads to Tibet or China or nowhere.
The small ramshackle town
is perched on a frontier
beyond which lies perpetual winter:
heaped-up drifts
marked only by the occasional prints
of snow-leopard or the great Himalayan condor.*

*This is the remotest place of pilgrimage.
Those who go further
go on some private errand and go alone.*

i.

We sat in the bus, my friend and I,
hurled through the mountains. Behind us
lay Badrinath, its mineral spring
and ancient idol; the town, tawdry
and sacred, receding to a spatter of roofs
against gray rock.

We were the only foreigners
among hill people: women
in velveteen and turquoise, spangled caps,
babies stiff in padded jackets.
One woman wept
for a girl left at the bus stop
with her new husband and his chattering sisters.
Others, seeing we were strangers,
leaned across to point out waterfalls,
rockslides, a green glimpse
of the Alakhananda River, deep
in its jagged gorge,
rushing toward confluence with the Ganges:

Mother Ganga, here a young, violent stream
falling from heaven to earth
in such a rapture of white water
that the god Shiva has to break her force,
catching her in his hair
in springs and fountains,
freshets, brooks, tributaries.

We jolted to a stop
beside a roadside shrine. Wind gusted
through stunted pines, rocking the bus. The priest
ran out, we crowded to the windows
to offer a few coins to the monkey god
and have our foreheads smeared
with thick vermilion.
The little temple,
carved and painted in yellow, blue and pink,
leaned crazily, as though about to hurl itself
off of its precipice.
Blessed, we careened on down the mountain.

ii.

Though we bathed in the spring
and visited the god
we had not gone as pilgrims.
Summer travelers
we went wherever trains and buses took us,
vaguely following the Ganges.

"Many monkeys in Benares"
you telegraphed home.

Lost in a flood of worshippers
we haunted the river, barefoot
on silty temple floors,
and fed whole garlands to the ribby cows
that mooned among the shrines. The hems
of our clothes were always damp
with the lap and splash of the river.

Nights, in our crumbling room
at Aces New Deal Hotel
we spread out treasures: tridents
on red silk cords, brass pots of Ganges water
sealed with wax, squares
of blue and orange cotton, printed
with the sacred syllable OM.

I said, *would pilgrims
spend so much time in trinket stalls?*

Shorn-headed widows
wrapped in dirty white
crouched on the river-stairs, held out
tin cups for alms.
their cheerfulness unnerved you.
Why is there suffering, you had asked,
would have asked any holy man or beggar
except that the fingerless, outstretched hand,
the ritual gleam of mutilation
defied your question.

Stranger,

At night, in the streets
actors performed the *Ramayana*:
bright scraps of silk, horse-hair wigs,
love's epic gestures.

By day
the goddess inhabited
a painted plaster body,
and god was a smooth stone
brought garlanded to the temple
and offered water.

*the riddle we ask
beyond the threshold
staring from masks of flesh
veil upon veil
and underneath
there are no words
for what the third eye sees
they are drowning
the images in
the river the riddle
what is the question
to this answer: yes*

Do you remember
the temple in Rishikesh? Stunned by light
we had gone inside to rest in the shade,
and entered a dimness down whose basalt steps
a waterfall of sound dropped, swirled
and vanished: solitary raga
of the young temple priest alone with the god.

He plucked the strings of his tambura
and a vibration filled the void
as though the void were humming to itself.
We had overheard a song
not meant for us. Silently picking up our sandals
we left.

Though we hesitated by the river,
we had a promise to keep.
"Should you reach Badrinath,"
our friend had said,
"I want to send a gift
to someone in a nearby village,"
and wrote, the Hindi letters
gracefully pendant as ripe fruit,
*Honoured Swamiji: my American friends
are on vacation in the mountains.
They bring one hundred rupees
for the ashram, and greetings
from the grandson of your teacher, Ragunath.*

"How will we find him?"
"Ask in Badrinath."

And everyone to whom we showed the letter
added a message on the envelope.
*Maharaj! Here are
some foreigners inquiring for you.*

*Revered Guruji, your servant Kumar
respectfully wishes you to know
all is well now with his wife.*

Each time, we had to tell the story
as our friend told it us,
until the words fell smooth as river-pebbles,
exemplary as an old mosaic
on a temple floor.

iii.

In a fever-stricken year
Ragunath lost his young wife in childbirth,
left his family
and went to live in Rishikesh
at the foot of the Himalayas.
There he fasted and prayed
until pilgrims, coming daily with their gifts of food
and their garlands and pious questionings,
distracted him from God.

He moved into the mountains,
climbing the donkey track
that edged the terraced, stony farms
guarded by dogs. Hill families,
driving their water buffalo to high pastures,
stood aside to let him pass: gaunt wanderer,
saffron-clad, black-bearded, long hair
knotted at the nape; followed
by his disciple, a young boy
with the high cheek bones and black, tilted eyes
of the mountain people.

When they reached Pandukeshwar,
a village so hidden in cloud
that only the hardiest pilgrims, persevering
from fabled Badrinath, would find it,
they stopped. The village priest
had died, the temple
stood locked, the images neglected.
And Ragunath stayed,
lured out the monkeys from the shrine,
brought wildflowers for the gods.

Below the village, the wild Alakhananda
dropped roaring from the mountains.
Here Ragunath built his ashram:
neat whitewashed hermitage,
paved courtyard,
a carved balcony. Two cells for sleeping,

and a large empty room
where pilgrims could put down their bedroll;
and opposite, a shrine to house the god.

He planted peas and marigolds
and apple saplings in the stony soil.

Then Ragunath wrote home:
Let the boy come to me.
And so his son was brought
in a procession of donkeys up the mountain,
blessed, and sent home again,
too young and bewildered to remember
his only meeting with his father.

The boy grew up to marry
and have a son.

Sometimes a wandering sadhu
would bring news of the ashram: a paved road
now led past. More disciples
had come, Ragunath being famous
for his austerities and the grace
that flowed from them.

In his hundredth year
he sent a letter to his family: *Great changes
will come upon India.
I shall not stay to see them.*
He called his followers to him,
blessed them, and gave the ashram
into the keeping of his first disciple.
Then he went deep into the mountains.

iv.

The gods of Pandukeshwar
rule their kingdom

beneath the mountain.
Queen Sita robed in cobalt blue,

King Rama in a scarlet cloak
hold out their hands to golden Hanuman

the hero monkey.
Their altar drips with garlands

fresh-woven daily.
How pale we look beside the gods,

how sparrow-drab the village children
twirling bare toes in the dust.

But where is Swamiji, master
of images? Whispers,

shy, sidelong smiles,
a sudden flight.

We sit down in the tea stall by the road
with its enormous clay stove fed with twigs

and watch food cooking.
Hammered brass pots

hold lentils, chili, rice.
Bread fries on the open fire,

sweet tea steams in clay cups
made to be drunk from once and broken.

We eat and drink
watched by mountain men in leaf-

green leggings and peaked caps
throwing dice beside the road.

*What if the ashram is gone?
What if no bus ever comes here again?*

*Will a woodcutter appear
to lead us through the forest*

*past slopes of birch and twisted spruce
where bhara! sheep dig through the crusted snow*

*with hoofs as black and brittle as obsidian?
If we climb far enough*

*we'll come to Ragunath in his high cave:
wind-hollowed, his body worn luminous as old silver.*

*The last stretch of the pilgrimage
is the hardest*

*inching along the rough track cut in the cliff,
waylaid at hairpin turns by the gods*

*in dizzying veils of light
or necklaces of skulls;*

*the whispers of the dead
hissing like wind in our ears.*

*One who returned from the journey
told me this:*

*lifting the cup from the well of life to his lips
he found the water turned to emerald ice.*

*The cook's apprentice
lies curled on a heap of rags*

*gazing down into the river. Dazzled
by the water's swirl, my eyes*

*begin to close, when Swamiji,
Swamiji! The children tug our hands.*

*They bring us to a small room in the temple
where he sits, Ragunath's disciple,*

*before a brassbound book.
Beside him on the bare stone floor*

a wicker basket glows with marigolds.
Then his disciple, cross-legged on the floor,

opens the letter, reads aloud
the words of his old guru's grandson.

Gold light of noon falls on the images,
the flowers, Swamiji's face.

v.

Wrapped in shawls against the mountain cold
we sat on the ashram wall
shelling peas. Apple trees spread laden branches
over us. Behind us the river
tumbled boulders down the gorge,
but here was composure and stillness, the small
chores of afternoon. Outside the kitchen,
the serving woman cleaned the rice for supper,
ground cinnamon and cloves
to honor our visit.

Swamiji's disciple
came with gifts: apples, two yellow roses,
roast ears of corn. And a herd of small calves
clattered down from their stony pasture,
butting each other
for pea pods and corn cobs
and last night's buttermilk.

Then our guide led us up the river
to a wild garden of cosmos and roses,
overgrown, shadowy, the flowers
escaping to the river, or twined
with trumpetflower vines around the door
of a stone hermitage.

Barefoot
we entered: fumes of incense,
and a man sitting in meditation

wearing only a rosary
of seeds and silver, and his tangled hair.
He looked up. His smile
went through us like a spear.

Then, with eyes newly opened
we saw, along the bank,
dwellings of other hermits,
one cut into the cliff, one, woven
of leafy branches, perched
above the overhang;
and so on up the stream, the cells
blending with rocks and trees and blossoms.

How long we stayed
in that shape-shifting space beside the river
I never afterwards could tell;
only that when at last we sighed
and rose to go
the sun was dropping toward the mountains
and the stream's light was quenched. We turned,
and airy wards and tumblers fell
behind us into place.

vi.

When we returned
to the compound
there was nothing to do
but look at the river,
a river that was now
only a mountain stream,
cold and deep.

*Going down going into
the deepest part of the cave
darkness no lips need move
in this place
that is all breath
who speaks who*

listens

We hardly spoke.
It was starting to get dark
and the serving woman
was filling oil lamps
against the coming night.

*who is the one who sees
without light
suddenly in the cave
vertigo of stars
a whirling center*

into which everything

vii. Swamiji's Tale

There is an ancient grove, its fringes touching
The edges of the world. Here came one day
Sage Vishvamitra, weary from long preaching,

To fast, and meditate on life, and pray.
Shaded by awnings, curtains of green leaves,
For years he watched the shadows' dappled play,

Quicksilver beauty that deceives
The ignorant heart. He knew it for the veil
Of Vishnu's Maya, loveliest disguise

Of the forever hidden Imperishable.
But as he watched, straining to look beyond,
He saw the tiniest worm, almost invisible,

Eating a pinprick hole in a green frond.
"What are you doing to my tree?" he said,
Voice creaky from disuse. "O friend,

It took a century" the worm replied
"To eat this least part of a single leaf
Among the billion billion leaves that shade

The ground you sit on. But this age-old grove
Will see the day when the last bite
Of the last leaf is taken. Then the breath

Of Brahma ends. A starless night
Will swallow time, the gods, and everything."
And Vishvamitra, "how could one worm blight

A grove vast as the universe?" So saying,
He fell asleep. It seemed to him he dreamed
Lifetimes: Brahmin, untouchable and king,

Serpent, ox, butterfly, a clod of loam.
But when he woke he saw a curious thing:
How bright was his green home

With more than half its foliage gone,
Stripped to the skeleton
Through which the sunlight shone.

viii.

In the pilgrims' hall
the oil lamp threw flittering shadows
as we ate our evening meal.
Swamiji told old tales
to entertain us, and brought
a picture of his teacher Ragunath
seated among mountains: one hand raised
in blessing or farewell.
In portraits
all holy men look alike. Polite, mistaken,
we admired the painting.

After eating, we walked, shivering,
to wash in the spring. The air
smelled of spices and evergreens, distant snowfields.
Dark, watchful peaks
Nilkanth, Kedarnath, Bandar Poonch
stooped over us, shutting out
the last light.
Then we slept
on thick wool blankets on the floor,
blankets so black and rough
we thought they must be knit of yak hair.

A brazen clangor tore us out of sleep:
The temple gong
waking the god, and Swamiji,
a shadow in the inner shrine,
passing the oil lamp back and forth

before the staring image. His disciple
circled the temple, chanting.

A full moon
spilled its silver on him, on the temple,
the river, and the near, snow-covered mountains.

We crouched in the doorway,
shawls covering our heads, as though our journey
had been for this only, to complete
a necessary task: neither inside nor out
but on the threshold,
held by the old, charged syllables,
the great, dark lemur-eyes
of god, the ancient masque.

The disciple touched his forehead to the ground.
Swamiji, beckoning,
filled our cupped hands with marigolds,
then drew a screen
between the god and us.

The lamp in our room
had burned out. We lay in dense blackness,
shutters closed against marauding monkeys,
talking softly of the day, of Ragunath
and Swamiji, the ashram.
My friend said "and the watcher by the river..."
and I, "no, shh..."
and the voice of the Alakhananda
flowed through us
like the ceaseless chanting of mantras.

ix.

In the night garden
a man keeps watch.
He is telling the story of my life
in a tongue I cannot understand;
tongues of moonlight
from the river to his face, light

on the mountain,
marigolds like heaped-up flames
in the dark hut.

As I bend
to dip water in a jar
a ring slips from my frozen hand
into the icy Alakhananda
flowing through the tangled hair of God.
The mountain shivers. He is dancing
on his dark dancing-ground, *Chidambaram*.
His drum beats like my heart.

But my friend
has turned into the seeker Gargi
from Swamiji's brassbound book.
A most persistent questioner,
she has been talking for two thousand years.

"Oh Sir, since all this world is woven, warp and woof, on
water,
on what is water woven, warp and woof?"

"On wind, O Gargi."

"On what then, please, is the wind woven, warp and woof?"

"On the moon, O Gargi."

"Yes, but on what is the moon woven, warp and woof?"

"On the worlds of the gods, O Gargi."

"The worlds of the gods,
across what are they woven, warp and woof?"

"O Gargi, they are woven
on that which people call
the present, past and future."

"Sir, that which people call
the present, past and future -
across what is it woven, warp and woof?"

"It is woven across the void, O Gargi."

"Oh Sir, across what -"

But as I listen, the river-murmur swells,
drowns out all speech except its own.
My ring, circle of jasper, turns
and turns in the green warp of water woven
on wind and moonlight, loom
of dream.

x.

We rose to chanting
as dawn warmed the mountains.
The serving woman brought brass tumblers
of steaming, nutmeg-flavored tea
where we sat with the old brindled watchdog
outside the courtyard.

There is a woman, Swamiji told us,
who comes for a time each year
to live like a nun in the ashram,
her mind fixed on the imperishable
across which the void is stretched.

Will she at last
leave even here,
and go like Ragunath into the Himalayas?

It was time
for us to take the stony river-road
to Pandukeshwar Village and the bus stop.
Children ran beside us, from small farms
people hailed Swamiji - *Maharaj! Maharaj!*

Abruptly
the bus came swerving down the mountain, full
to overflowing.

We had imagined
that in farewell we might, like pilgrims,
bend low and touch his feet.
Instead, our last memory was laughter,
and his hands pushing us
into the crowded bus.

And the ashram, our gift
for one day, receded,
a white speck in a photograph of mountains:
where we, bleached in the great light
and holding marigolds
stand timelessly beside the Alakhananda,
thumbprints like blood
staining our foreheads.

GLOSSARY

Apples of Sita: A fruit, also called custard apples.

Ashram: The building or group of buildings inhabited by a holy man or woman and their disciples.

Ayah: A children's nurse. Nowadays, often a babysitter.

Bhuleshwar: One of the oldest and most crowded sections of Bombay.

Brahma: One of the great Hindu gods. Each of his breaths creates and destroys a universe.

Channa: A legume, similar to peas and lentils.

Chela: A disciple.

Chidambaram: The mythical center of the universe, where the god Shiva dances his cosmic dance.

Curds: Yoghurt.

Dabba, Kathori, Thali: Cooking and eating utensils.

Djinns: Helpful or harmful spirits of Muslim folklore.

Fenni: A liquor made from cashew nuts or coconut.

Ganga: The River Ganges, who is a goddess in Hindu mythology.

Garam Pani: Hot water.

Ghats: Steps. In Benares these are a series of wide terraces going down to the Ganges.

Ghazal: Originally a Persian poetic form.

Ghee: Clarified butter. Used in religious ceremonies as well as in cooking.

Guruji: A guru is a religious teacher. The syllable -ji added to a name implies respect and affection.

Karma: Literally action, specifically good or bad actions; often used in the context of reincarnation to describe the balance of good or bad actions in your past lives that determines your present fate.

Krishna: A popular Hindu god, an incarnation of Vishnu.

Kumkum: A red paste used by Indian women to make an ornamental mark on their foreheads.

Lakshmi: The goddess of wealth, wife of Vishnu.

Lama: A Tibetan Buddhist monk.

Lateen-rigged: An ancient way of rigging sails, still used in the Middle East and India.

Maharaj: A king. Used as a term of respect for a great man.

Mantra: A sacred word or phrase used as a focus for meditation or as a prayer. In Tibetan Buddhism these phrases are written on pieces of paper and put into a wheel to be turned by the wind or by the hands of pilgrims, thus ensuring their continuous repetition.

Maya: The personification of the female energy of the god Vishnu. Her dance creates the illusion of the ever changing multiplicity of forms in the universe.

Memsahib: A lady, either Indian or foreign. Originally from the British Raj expression "Madam Sahib".

Mithila: A district in central India, where Sita is said to have been born, and where women carry on a tradition of sacred painting.

Mridangam: A type of drum.

Nahi: No. Also spelled **nahin**.

Namaste: The usual Hindi greeting. Pronounced with the accent on the last syllable.

Raga, Ragini: Ragas are the fundamental melodies upon which classical Indian music is based. In Moghul paintings certain ragas were depicted as men accompanied by female ragas or raginis.

Ramayana: An ancient and still popular epic tale.

Rishikesh: A holy city in North India.

Sadhu: A Hindu ascetic, often a wandering beggar.

Sambhar: A spicy South Indian legume and vegetable stew.

Shiva: One of the great Hindu gods. He is particularly associated with the cosmic dances of creation and of destruction.

Shri Badrinath: Badrinath is the name of a North Indian Hindu god, and also of the pilgrimage town where his image is kept. **Shri** is a respectful form of address.

Sita, Rama, Hanuman: The divine major characters of the **Ramayana**.

Swami: A Hindu priest, a holy man.

Tambura: A stringed drone instrument used to accompany singing.

Turmeric: A root, somewhat resembling ginger, which is ground up to make a spice for culinary and ritual use.

Uma: One of the names of the god Shiva's wife.

Veena: A stringed musical instrument. Saraswati, the goddess of music and poetry, is always shown playing a veena.

Vishnu: One of the great Hindu gods.

Yogi: A religious adept.