The Hindu World of R. K. Narayan’s *MR. Sampath*

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**ABSTRACT**

R. K. Narayan’s novel illustrates how a man matures to abandon adolescent colonial dreams by recovering a Hindu outlook and values. The 1949 novel focuses most on views associated with *asrama*-dharma or developmental expectations associated with four stages of life: childhood, householder, retiree, and *sanyasi* (ascetic). In the comic development of *Sunrise Pictures*, the novel illustrates how Hinduism views life stages as comparable to dramatic roles or performances for the purpose of achieving aesthetic and spiritual insight. In the end, Srinivas and Sampath reverse roles. Sampath, a mentor in the beginning, wanders away from his family as an outcast, while Srinivas succeeds in developing satisfying positions in his family and in society.

**KEYWORDS**

R.K. Narayan; narayan; asrama-dharma; sudhir kakar; india; commonwealth literature; postcolonial literature

**中文摘要**

R.K.纳拉扬创作的《萨姆帕斯先生》讲述了一个人如何通过重拾印度观念和价值观, 促进自己成长, 并最终放弃了儿时的殖民梦想的故事。这部在1949年出版的小说主要关注“四行期”（*asrama-dharma*) 相关的观点或与生命中的四个阶段相关的发展预期——这四个阶段包括幼年时期、家居期、林栖期和遁世期（*sanyasi*)。在“日出电影”（*Sunrise Pictures*) 充满戏剧性的展开过程中, 这部小说揭示了印度教如何将生命阶段同戏剧角色或表演相比较, 以期达到某种审美和精神见解的目的。斯里尼瓦和萨姆帕斯这两个角色在最后发生的反转。萨姆帕斯一开始扮演的是导师角色, 然而, 就在斯里尼瓦成功地在家庭和社会方面取得令人满意的成就时, 萨姆帕斯离开了家庭, 成为了流浪者。

Because it expresses a Hindu view of life development, *Mr. Sampath* is perhaps Narayan’s most representative novel. However, readers unfamiliar with Hindu culture are unlikely to recognize how Narayan’s characters and themes illustrate Hindu views. Sudhir Kakar’s many readable works on Hindu and Indian culture are helpful in providing background to better understand Narayan’s novels. Troy Wilson *Organ’s The Hindu Quest for the Perfection of Man* offers an insightful view of Hindu development. Hinduism believes that human beings reach full development by following the dictates of dharma, which are seen as guiding innate processes of growth and development. Sudhir Kakar explains that dharma defines a “progression from task to task and from stage to stage [throughout life development] in the ultimate realization of *moksha*” (*Kakar, The Inner World* 42–43). Dharma and *karma* are reciprocal processes in which...
Hinduism reverses the Western priority between identity and character. In the West, we think of character as a moral attribute, an adjective in relation to a noun. Hinduism reverses the ontology to recognize how character (karma) produces a series of identities from childhood to adolescence to adulthood and finally to old age. Dharma identifies patterns of life development evident in the caste system (varna-dharma) and in distinct stages of life development (asrama-dharma). Kakar’s “Human life cycle” tells us that “a vast majority of traditional Hindus are convinced that failure to renounce the life-concerns of an outlived life stage, as well as a premature commitment to tasks that are appropriate only for a later stage of life, are ‘bad’ for the individual” (44). One cannot evade dharma because it is not an external rule or command compelling an arbitrary mode of behavior; it is a kind of logos or insight defining an inherent pattern of human development.

Mr. Sampath illustrates stages of development. Explaining how this involves dharma, William Theodore De Bary writes: “In spite of the comprehensive character of dharma, in its most common connotation it was limited to two principal ideals, namely the organization of social life through well-defined and well-regulated classes (varnas) and the organization of an individual’s life within those classes into definite stages (ashramas). Thus, in popular parlance, dharma almost came to mean just varna-ashrama-dharma, that is the dharmas (ordained duties) of the four classes and the four stages of life” (213). This produces identity in a process different from Romantic or free-will decisions that produce a unique Western individual. Kakar stresses the recognition of explicitly defined steps that specify “marked changes as the individual moves into each new phase of life: proper developmental progress requires the meeting and surmounting of the critical task of each phase in the proper sequence and at the proper time” (Kakar, The Inner World 42).

Childhood is a period of life when dreams are not yet counterbalanced by experience. Along with school graduation, marriage is an important rite of passage that initiates a young person into the second stage of life. In India, householders were mostly subsistence farmers. When their grown sons became old enough to assume the day-to-day agricultural tasks and began to have children of their own, grandparents entered a third period of life, one in which the demand for immediate engagement in tending crops, raising children, and paying debts were reduced. On the other hand, even more weighty social responsibilities came into focus, such as those regarding family and community management: the arrangement of marriages for one’s children; accepting a greater role in controlling the extended family and affairs of the village or caste; and greater responsibility for teaching those involved in the first period of life. One also prepared for the final period of life as a sanyasi by matching the theory learned as a student with the experience of being a householder. In a sense, the sanyasi outgrows all the parts that life offers, in terms of both varna and asrama. Without duties, the sanyasi has no obligations that require playing expected parts or roles in life. He is liberated from putting on a costume, uniform, or mask and liberated from learning a script or offering expected stage movements or gestures. Having played many parts in life, he is now, ideally, a critic who can enjoy the performances of others and appreciate the entire drama of life (lila).

Acquiring an appropriate sadhana (discipline) or congenial marga (path) is important in adopting a Hindu view. While varna recognizes social roles and asrama...
recognizes developmental stages, the third component of a Hindu outlook recognizes psychological differences among people. Philosophically inclined people are inclined to follow a jñana-marga (the path of wisdom or insight). Srinivas is such a personality illustrated by his interest in the Upanishads (Narayan 25). Those who are orthopraxically inclined — concerned about what to eat, what to wear, and what their neighbors think of them — are happy to follow the explicit code of behavior offered by karma-marga. The sanyasi landlord illustrates such concern and anxiety. Some are uninterested in both theology and morality. They may be attracted to the emotional appeal offered by bhakti-marga (the path of devotion). Ravi illustrates something of this path by his infatuation with Shanti. But, to be truly a marga for life development, bhakti must be more than sentiment and emotional self-indulgence. Finally, Hinduism suggests that many are attracted to the tantra-marga, the path of ceremony, ritual, and magic. Ravi’s exorcism, which so fascinates his mother, offers an illustration (204).

Hindu identity and the contexts for personal actions and human development are specified by locating and combining specific, but changing, points on these three scales. Heinrich Zimmer, who consistently voiced his Western distaste for the constraints of dharma, wrote: “The correct manner of dealing with every life problem that arises […] is indicated by the laws (dharma) of the caste (varna) to which one belongs, and of the particular stage-of-life (asrama) that is proper to one’s age. One is not free to choose” (Zimmer 152). Kakar adds emphasis by stating that “For most Hindus […] independent voluntary action is unthinkable” (Kakar, The Inner World 37).

The first paragraph of the novel suggests an interplay of Hindu forces, using the metaphor of a road: “The Market Road was the life-line of Malgudi, but it had a tendency to take abrupt turns and disrupt itself into side-streets, which wove a network of crazy lanes behind the facade of buildings on the main road” (Narayan 5). Like Market Road, life (karma) does not offer a clear, straight road. Our lives take unforeseen, abrupt turns, to be disrupted, and occasionally lost in side-streets. Yet, as we saunter down the road, engrossed with facades, stage scenes, costumes, and scripts (maya), karma follows the roadbed of dharma. This is what Srinivas’ experience illustrates; that asrama-dharma guides us through life development and toward moksha even as we are captivated or absorbed by ephemeral interests, concerns, and plans at each stage of life. When we first meet Srinivas, he is a 37-year-old student of the Upanishads (12). Although his elder brother, the custodian of the extended family, reminds him that he has a family of his own (a wife and son), Srinivas is uninterested in accepting the householder identity conferred on him by asrama-dharma. He has fled from family entanglements, feeling that “before knowing where one was, one would find oneself senile or in the grave, with so little understood or realized.” Srinivas experimented with “agriculture, apprenticeship in a bank, teaching, law – he gave everything a trial once, but with every passing month he felt the excruciating pain of losing time” (11). Although he very well knows “The family tradition was that they should graduate at Malgudi in the Albert Mission College, spend two years in Madras for higher studies in the law, and then return each to his own room in their ancient sprawling house,” he rebels from this expectation, feeling that he has a unique identity and vocation, which must be discovered at nearly any price or sacrifice (12).

There are two motives at work in Srinivas’ rebellion. The first is defined by his sensitivity to, or talent for, the jñana-marga. Not content to merely perform dharma,
he wants to thoroughly understand it. This philosophical bent puts him at odds with the family tradition of legal practice, which is a clear symbol of karma-marga. In 1938, the dramatic date of the novel, the law Srinivas studies to become an advocate was, of course, English law. The British Raj is evident when Srinivas and Sampath petition a court to obtain a license to print their newspaper, The Banner. The second motive is associated with writing editorials for The Banner in which Srinivas seems as much to be imitating the Romantic model of Henry David Thoreau as he does a Upanisadic sage when he muses: “Who am I? Till I know who I am, how can I know what I should do?” (Narayan 13). The implied ontology here is Western suggesting an autonomous ego or identity that chooses actions or behavior. The assumption that one has an innate and unique identity to be discovered is a tenant of Romantic belief. Hinduism turns this formula around. Social identity (jati) is a function of what we do; and as we do changes in life, so does social identity. Thus, Kakar explains “the traditional idea of the ‘twice-born’ [...] is the belief that a child is not born as a member of society until between the ages of five and ten” (Kakar, The Inner World 12). Identity is not a problem requiring discovery, but rather a record of dramatic performances and a journey ultimately leading to moksha or to wearing out and becoming disenchanted with all the parts life offers. Kakar explains: “For ‘I’ is neither self, which is the object of ‘I,’ nor ego, a psychic agency. ‘I,’ as Hindus would say, is pure consciousness [without an object, including the self as object], the atman of Vedantic thought whose only counterplayer is brahman” (19).

Srinivas flees his family in hopes of discovering a unique (Romantic) identity. Ironically, the texts he relies on to fuel his rebellion are the Upanishads, which suggest that ultimately, having discarded all dramatic roles, one cannot be differentiated from life itself (atman/Brahman). Traditionally, a student relies on an older guru to explain such mysteries over time. Consequently, it is significant that the first person Srinivas meets in Malgudi is a sanyasi. It is possible to say that Srinivas’ karma caused this meeting; that Srinivas unconsciously left home in search of a guru. As a 37-year-old father, Srinivas’ regression from the householder stage of asrama indicates unfinished psychological development that must be accomplished before he can meaningfully accept the dharma of being a householder. It also indicates the failure of Western law to serve as a substitute or alternative to dharma to provide a map for life that would give Srinivas a meaningful identity.

A greedy landlord, the sanyasi is as much a religious fraud as the movie actors who play the parts of Hindu gods, as the greedy priests who initiate “a new religion” at the film studio, or the tantrics, looking “very much like Shiva in make-up” who attempt to exorcize the demon from Ravi (Narayan 204). However, recognizing a fraud does not thereby reveal an authentic form or truth. Srinivas is amused by the sanyasi because he comes to better recognize that Hinduism views all social roles as inauthentic, being invented from illusory aspirations, emotional needs, and fantasy (maya). At one point in the novel, Srinivas contemplates the personnel office of the movie studio, which is filled with “aspirants and experts… . Srinivas felt that there was essentially no difference between the two” (153). It was only that the so-called experts got there first to gain an advantage in mastering “an esoteric idiom,” which, especially in regard to movies, Srinivas knows is entirely made up (93). The politician, Somu, becomes a movie
producer; the printer Sampath becomes a movie director; and the girl spotted by Ravi at a temple becomes a movie starlet—all by simple talk.

In following dharma to thereby negate the fascination of karma, it is not enough to stumble through a ritual. Sudhir Kakar informs us that “in the Hindu scheme of things [...] ‘adult work’ is valued not so much for the external rewards it brings, the intrinsic fascination it holds, or the social respect it insures in the present, as for the developmental apprenticeship it provides” (Kakar, The Inner World 39). The essential task is not, as Zimmer suggested, to close the gap so that there is no distance between the scripted part (dharma) and performer (karma). The psychotherapist, Sudhir Kakar, explains that in the West “A good reality sense, according to psycho-analysis, shows itself in the absence of a conscious feeling of the self or the various selves. This, however, is precisely the situation which the Hindu ways of liberation would seek to reverse” (20). Accordingly, Srinivas finds that life is structured by dharma in the same way that a movie is structured by a script. In both cases, our life roles and dramatic identities offer nothing more than opportunities for elegant play (lila). Delusion and bondage arise when we begin to so thoroughly identify with the parts we play that we take the fictional or ephemeral outcome as important enough to do violence.

To condemn the landlord as a hypocritical villain, because he is an inauthentic sanyasi, misses the Hindu point of the novel, which is that we are all actors. Does Sampath better fulfill the role of movie producer, or Srinivas the part of newspaper editor, or Somu the part of politician? Such questions miss the point that the roles and stages of life are not important in themselves, but only for what they reveal or express in regard to life development. Narayan’s fiction is comic because none of the plots or characters are important in their own terms. Similarly, Hinduism offers liberation (moksha) when we see life as an invitation for playfulness (lila). Consider how quickly and easily the actors adopt parts in relationship to other actors who respond by adopting appropriate roles to support the shared fantasy. The sanyasi becomes a foster father for Srinivas—all the more attractive because his pretensions, and hence authority, are so easily seen through and laughed away. Sampath becomes a foster elder brother who encourages and nurtures Srinivas’ playful regression at the very time when his actual brother admonishes him to grow up. For a time, Sampath seems to possess all the wisdom and candor of an ideal elder brother who shares the younger brother’s rebellious struggle against the father and who illustrates how to carry it off. Sampath easily manipulates the sanyasi by pretending to be his disciple, while Srinivas has to be content to mutter under his breath at the sanyasi’s pompous pronouncements. In obtaining the license to print The Banner, Sampath discloses the secret of his success. Srinivas wishes directly to oppose the authority of the magistrate to censor what he prints as a matter of principle, but Sampath tells the callow editor: “You go on with politics or revolution or whatever you like, but you can’t say so in a court; if you do, they may ask for deposits, and you will have all kinds of troubles and worries” (Narayan 24). The point is that there are no principles or truths to be fought over to the death (himsa), but only a game to be played. It is no wonder that Sampath’s “help was invaluable to Srinivas” as the two boys play at the game of producing a newspaper (21) and later play at producing a movie (86).

The Banner is more of a journal than a newspaper. Instead of accepting his asrama-dharma as a husband, father, and wage earner, Srinivas edits life to conform to his
desires and fantasies. Like all social systems, Hinduism opposes such infantile (id) freedom, promising a deeper, more mature, and wiser freedom (moksha) and a deeper understanding of life. However, this “accomplishment necessarily presupposes a long course of training through the three asramas or disciplinary stages.” These “are stages of strife when selfishness is slowly but steadily rooted out” (Hiriyanan 75). In a Hindu world, those who refuse to accept these disciplines do not preserve a Romantic primal identity; they atrophy in self-indulgence. Accordingly, the sanyasi’s religious life, as well as his death, are a joke; Ravi’s infatuation is regressive and self-destructive; and Sampath’s efforts to control Shanti exile him from life structured by dharma. At the end of the novel, Shanti returns to asrama, to look after her son, while Sampath abandons his wife and children, confessing to being a pariah: “I shall have to become invisible” (Narayan 219).

The sanyasi dies, Ravi goes insane, and Sampath abandons as a fugitive. These failures provide moral illustrations for Srinivas. He cannot follow them; still he is reluctant to entirely forfeit his adolescent dreams. “Family duties come before any other duty. Is it an absolute law? What if I don’t accept the position? I am sure, if I stick to my deeper conviction, other things [...] will adjust themselves.” When his wife and son catch up to him in Malgudi, Srinivas is shocked at the appearance of his son: “The coat he wore was too small for him, appearing to stop at his waist, his sleeves stopped four inches beyond the wrist, the collar was frayed: he had neglected his family” (Narayan 33). Srinivas sees himself reflected in his son. His marriage was arranged, and now Srinivas is faced with a son who threatens to replace him before he has begun to take hold of life. He is as helpless and callow as his son and his wife is another such child. “He raved against their upbringing” thinking that “a child’s life was reduced to a mere approved behavior in the midst of father, mother, grandmother and uncles; and later in life parents-in-law, husband, and so on and on endlessly till one had no opportunity to think of one’s own views on any matter.” Srinivas feels cheated or duped by life because it has not offered forthright, reasonable (legal) terms or sufficiently discrete options for individual choice. But, instead of recognizing the mystery in this, Srinivas ignores his wife and child to ruminate “upon these questions in the garret of The Banner” (37).

Ironically, in fleeing his own extended family, Srinivas creates a surrogate family to work through his karmic or psychological difficulties. If the sanyasi is a father figure and Sampath an elder brother, Ravi becomes a younger brother. Thus, Srinivas intervenes when Ravi loses his job because, although he is employed as a stenographer, he will not be imposed upon to learn how to spell (Narayan 106). When he fails to get Ravi’s job back, Srinivas relies on Sampath to invent a position at Sunrise Pictures to allow all three brothers to play together. Srinivas envies the panache of his elder brother, Sampath. With regard to his surrogate younger brother, Srinivas imagines Ravi to have a naiveté, an innocence and purity that requires protection. When Ravi moons over Shanti, idly sketching her face, Srinivas reflects that: “He was no longer a petty, hag-ridden bank clerk, or an unwelcome, thoughtless visitor, but a personality, a creative artist, fit to take rank among the celestials.” Identifying with Ravi, he knows that: “He had no doubt a home, mother, and brothers, and sisters, but all that signified nothing. His heart was not there” (44) — evidently because Ravi’s family oppose, instead of indulge, the 28-year-old’s adolescent passion.
Maturing, one moves up the ladder of *asrama*-dharma, achieving greater insight. At each stage, one has only a fantastic notion about the life he aspires to at the next stage. When one accepts the reality of life in the next *asrama*, dreams, fantasies, and fears dissolve into understanding. The process of regression and rebellion must therefore insist on describing events in its own a priori terms to predictably render a frightening vision of impending destruction. Thus, the *sanyasi* talks about making an adjustment, meaning that we should do our best to ignore or deny anything that threatens our fantasies (Narayan 16). *The Banner* illustrates such an adjustment, as does the curtain in Sampath’s Truth Printing Works. In fact, Srinivas intuits something of “a symbolism in it: it seemed to be expressive of existence itself; and Srinivas saw no reason why he should grudge the printer his mysterious existences and mazes beyond the purple curtain” (45). Srinivas raves against “orthodox idiocies – all the rigorous compartmenting of human beings” (35) — failing to understand the relationship between *maya* (veil, curtain) and *Brahman* (reality). Srinivas fears that there is only destruction of his dreams behind the curtain. Srinivas will not intrude on Sampath’s dreams the way his older brother and wife intruded on his dreams. He will follow Sampath’s doctrine: “I believe in keeping people happy” (68).

Sampath keeps people happy by indulging their fantasies, by playing whatever games they propose. Sampath offers the opposite of dharma. He has little need to remind us that his “heart has always been in make-up, costumes, and the stage” (Narayan 84). The paradigm for this attitude is a mother’s love for her child who is charmingly engrossed in play. This feeling is evoked by the image of Krishna as an infant or child (*Bala Krishna*). The focus is not exclusively on the child as an object. It also includes the mother’s enchantment in watching her child engaged in fantasy (*maya*). This provides an illustration of how *Shakti* sustains our involvement in *lila*. Even so, children grow up, and mothers have expectations for their behavior. Sampath’s games lack such grace or childlike innocence being improvisations based on *asrama*-dharma that involve irony. They can never replace the original, authentic emotions associated with life’s stages, such as emotions evoked by marriage, parenthood, or professional success. Sampath is most entertaining when the audience is mature enough to recognize the role Sampath adopts and the situation his performance mocks. The danger is that the immature will mistake the imitation for the original performance fostering self-deception when there should be insight.

It is important to recognize the difference between real families, created by *karma* and governed by *asrama*-dharma, and artificial ones that resemble children playing house. In real extended families, power is inordinately invested in the institution and codified by dharma. There is little individual freedom. One cannot choose parents, siblings, nor even, in most cases, a spouse. Individual identity is largely precluded. Thus, Srinivas struggles for adolescent self-definition at age 38. Heinrich Zimmer expresses a jaundiced view on the effect of dharma in regard to personal identity, writing: “everyone tends to become petrified, dehumanized, stabilized, and purged of spontaneous individuality – in proportion to the degree of perfection he achieves in the intensely stylized enactment of his timeless role” (Zimmer 157). Artificial families — such as the people living in the landlord’s houses; or the people working at Sunrise Pictures; or the people Srinivas sees as foster father and brothers — are attractive because they do not threaten the autonomy of the individual. It is alluring to believe
that we can have loving and supportive relationships without enduring the criticism and conflicts of a real mother or spouse or even neighbors. This is typical of adolescent day-dreams of “love marriage” in contrast to an arranged marriage, which is a staple theme in Indian novels. Sampath’s homily — “When a person becomes my customer he becomes a sort of blood relation of mind” (Narayan 68) — is the greatest of his deceptions. As the end of the novel clarifies, he has no real family nor identity; he has only dreams.

Predictably, Srinivas is enthralled by Sampath’s overture because it sounds so much like a tenet of Hinduism. For in a sense we are all related because we all spring from the same life source (atman/Brahman), and after all the karmic roles are played out, we revert to that primal identity or non-identity. Srinivas is quick to recognize this concept, which seems more grandiose and less threatening than the demand to accept life roles specified by asrama-dharma. Srinivas thinks that “it is in that total picture we perceive God” and laments that “if only people could realize what immense schemes they are components of” (Narayan 49–50). The implication is that they would not be concerned about advice from elder brothers in regard to family obligations, nor any other demand of asrama-dharma. Ironically, this recognition ultimately threatens all individual identities. It is the basis for Zimmer’s distaste of Hinduism that considers as illusory the very identities that Westerners believe are most real. Like Ravi’s artistic vision, Srinivas’ oneiric outlook threatens to undermine the no-nonsense demands of dharma specified in caste and family roles. However, this does not empower the individual against society because moksha extinguishes not only the dream, but also the dreamer. Kakar explains that “If moksha is the goal of life, then dharma […] is the means through which man approaches the goal” (Kakar, Portrait 184–185). Our fundamental identity is grounded in Brahman, which is dynamic or a verb rather than a noun or object of consciousness. We can enjoy playing (lila) roles in a series of incarnations or life stages, but more often the experience offered in social roles involves worry, anxiety, apprehension, and a sense of arbitrary social construction (samsara). Instead of pride in accomplishment, we more often feel a sense of relief, not merely for fulfilling an immediate obligation, but also for wearing out or exhausting the naiveté or fascination that enticed us to become attached to a social role. Kakar explains that Hinduism “has as its goal the liberated, rather than the successful or the ‘achieving’ man; which emphasizes the possibility of man’s realization rather than his salvation” (Kakar, The Inner World 34). Troy Wilson Organ explains that to be liberated from obligations defined in social identities is “To become Brahman [which] does not mean to become transformed into a Being different from what we are now; it means to enter fully into an eternal form of freedom” without anxiety or worry (151).

Are we all part of one super-extended family as Hinduism suggests? If so, is it the real kind of family controlled, in part, by asrama-dharma or the artificial kind which is more of a metaphor existing, like the movies, in fantasy? Are the concerns of Srinivas for the readers of The Banner or his concern for Ravi and Sampath more legitimate or important than his concern, or lack of it, for his wife and son or for his brother and his natal family? Such questions remind us of the sanyasi’s concern to control the marriage of his granddaughter, which is motivated by egotism and antagonism with his children. When asked about his family, the sanyasi dismisses them as “an ungrateful brood,” although he continues to harbor dreams about a granddaughter whose marriage
hopes to decide (Narayan 55–56). The key to his lonely and bitter old age is revealed by one of his children’s spouses who says: “my father-in-law was a peculiar man … he must always go his own way […] He did what he pleased” (165). His example is a parody of the true sanyasi. Starving for love himself, he even hates little children because they will not obey his commands. But after all, he is not their father or grandfather any more than he is a true sanyasi. If Srinivas succeeds in going his own way, he is in danger of following in the sanyasi’s footsteps to have only the outward appearance of being liberated.

As the novel illustrates, the family provides the context for most people to work through the stages of life development in hopes of moksha. Troy Wilson Organ explains that the Hindu “thinks of himself as belonging to a family, a jati [a social identity], a varna [caste], a gotra [clan derived from a common ancestor], a village. The dharma view of human life is the view of social relationships and obligations. But he does not emphasize the obligation to improve the social groups to which he belongs” (Organ 157) because these are grounded in maya to provide opportunities to exhaust or work through our karmic or emotional attachments. Kakar confirms the importance of family saying, “the extended family is the primary field and foil for an individual’s developing sense of identity” (Kakar, The Inner World 123). When Srinivas visits Sampath’s home, he is served and entertained by the printer’s wife and five daughters. Singing of Krishna and dancing as his gopis, the girls almost palpably embody lila, the divine play of Brahman: “It seemed to Srinivas a profound enchantment provided by the father and the daughters” (Narayan 87). Visiting Ravi’s home, Srinivas finds smoke and squalor amid an “impossible heaping of boxes and bedding and clothes.” When the old man’s wife appears to ask Srinivas to help her son, her husband thunders at her: “Get in and mind your business. I don’t want you to trouble this gentleman with all your idiotic words,” although he asks for exactly the same thing himself. When the old lady tells one of her children to bring a mat for Srinivas, it causes bickering among the brothers. All the while the old man laments the decline of his family, whining for Srinivas’ help while denying any responsibility (dharma) for the tumult: “it was not my mistake exactly, but my father’s” (117).

The scene in which Srinivas visits Sampath’s home presents a nearly idyllic family life. Readers may wonder why such a charming scene, in which Srinivas recognizes that the children are “engaging themselves in a divine game,” as they sing of Krishna and Shiva, does not carry him away in Hindu day-dreams about how we are all manifestations of Brahman. Instead, Srinivas is “somehow a little saddened,” feeling that “there was something pathetic in the attempt to do anything in this drab, ill-fitting background” (Narayan 87). This response suggests that Srinivas is still dreaming, finding the movies more alluring than real family roles. Nonetheless, Srinivas is pulled in the direction of duty by caring for Sampath’s children: “He felt tears very nearly coming to his eyes” and “Srinivas felt an oppression in his chest […] it all seemed too sad for words” (88). As with his own son, dressed in his too-small coat, Srinivas is assailed by the guilt of playing self-indulgent games with Sampath while the printer’s children suffer neglect.

By showing us Sampath’s family life, Narayan suggests what Sampath sacrifices in pursuing Shanti. Sampath boasts that he can maintain two families, his own and another with Shanti (Narayan 179). In this we are tempted to see the Sampath of old
who could keep “the whole place spinning around” as “his voice commanded people hither and thither,” while he himself remained detached, a “monarch above the din” (66). But the movie mogul is not the same character as the printer of Malgudi. Srinivas and Sampath trade roles in the second half of the novel. As Srinivas gradually goes back to his family, Sampath gradually abandons his family. It is now Srinivas who lectures on āśrama-dharma, admonishing Sampath: “Think of your wife”; consider “the future of all your five children”; and: “You have no right to cause any unhappiness to your wife and children” (180).

At the end of the novel, Srinivas is the only character with a real family. Though he does not entirely capitulate to their authority, he does acknowledge obligations. When The Banner fails, Srinivas is not yet ready to recognize their authority over even part of his life, though he is shocked to realize “what a lot he had missed in life and for so long, cooped up in that room” writing his adolescent diary or journal (Narayan 80). Srinivas needed to play the game of trying to produce the movie with Sampath and Ravi to experience how empty and self-indulgent such dreams are. Sudhir Kakar reminds us that such ambitions may be “the stuff of reality in Western thought and yet maya to the Hindus” (Kakar, The Inner World 20). Repression or loss of a dream is never adequate in Hinduism to cause growth or insight. One must recognize the dream for what it is before the allure fades. It is as though Sampath takes up Srinivas’ life in order to show him where he is headed. As Srinivas abandoned his family to play the role of editor, so Sampath now abandons his family to become a movie director. As Srinivas hoped to “set the world right” in the pages of The Banner, so too Sampath aspires to make life over again into a perfectly controlled movie.

As though performing for Srinivas, exaggerating to ensure that he cannot miss the point, Sampath preposterously declares that “there is no encouragement for the arts in our country” (Narayan 91). In a way, every Hindu produces his own movie of life; everyone is an artist. Though this may be true of all the world, Hinduism is the culture most aware of this; it is the quickest to recognize the appropriateness of the metaphor because of its emphasis on self-awareness. Mimicking Hamlet, and echoing Srinivas’ question about identity, Sampath asks: “What am I in this scheme of things?” Srinivas offers a suitably Hindu response, saying: “If you understood it, you would understand everything.” But Sampath indicates his attachment to maya by asking a literal question, “Am I the producer of this picture or am I not?” (125).

No longer an indulgent older brother, Sampath is now chauffeured in a studio car and informs his scriptwriter: “I can manage to stay with you for a quarter of an hour more” (Narayan 125). Sampath loses self-awareness, his sense of detachment, even as he ironically hopes to produce a movie about Shiva, the divine manifestation of detached consciousness, or more accurately a movie about how kama (desire) disturbs detachment. Kama destroys Ravi, and Sampath also finds he is not Shiva who can control kama. This is precisely the function of āśrama-dharma: to control the flow of libido or kama in life. Abandoning this discipline, Sampath pays the price for his infatuation with Shanti. Sampath’s regression into a grasping, diminished character is illustrated by his relationship with Somu. Early in the novel, Sampath almost casually manipulates Somu when the politician complains about not receiving printed copies of a political speech. After a masterful performance by Sampath, Somu thanks him for not printing the speech he had come to demand (71–3)! Now, “Srinivas noted a new tone of hushed
respect in Sampath’s voice whenever he referred to Somu” (156). Sampath has recast Somu, the movie producer, to play guru to Sampath the director. It is also likely that Sampath is worried about having extorted money from Somu.

When Sampath printed *The Banner*, he occasionally offered minor corrections of fact to Srinivas, which the dreamy editor resented as reminiscent of his elder brother’s admonitions to face facts. Sampath is generally unattached to the content of *The Banner*, to its battles, or to what it hopes to accomplish. He is content to be the printer, not the editor. In the film world, Sampath aspires to be producer, director, and finally even the star actor. His obsession to control Shanti is symptomatic of *avidya* (delusion). Shanti plays the role of Parvathi, Shiva’s consort. Another name for this goddess is *Shakti*. In this form, she personifies the energy of life, libido. Troy Wilson Organ comments that mythologically, “Shiva is wisdom and Sakti is energy” (Organ 321).

Only the detached wisdom of Shiva can control *Shakti*, and as we have seen, human wisdom largely comes from walking the path laid out by dharma, including *asrama-dharma*. Sampath’s belief — “I know I can manage her” — is self-deceptive (Narayan 194). It is *Shakti’s* very purpose to destroy such illusions, to force us to live and learn instead of merely dream.

Like a performance for a younger brother, Sampath gambles everything, including his real family, on the ability of his self-invented role of movie director to control life (*Shakti*). Srinivas provides commentary on Sampath’s decline into *avidya* (delusional ego-identification) taken from Hindu works such as the *Bhagavad Gita*. For example, about his own work as a script writer, he says: “It is not my concern what they do with my work” (Narayan 136). Provoked when his script seems to be diminished by the exigencies of production, “He wondered if he might get up and make a scene. ‘I’m not going to allow the story to be done by this horrible pair.’ But presently another inner voice said: ‘If it is not this horrible pair, some other horrible pair will do it, so why bother?’” (143). Even so, Srinivas continues to lecture Sampath “on family ties and responsibilities,” recognizing that his friend is “completely lost in his new interests” (144). This scene gains depth when compared to a similar scene with Ravi. Srinivas asks Ravi if he is sure that Shanti is the same young woman he has been dreaming of. Srinivas informs him that Shanti “says this is her first visit to this town,” implying that Ravi couldn’t have seen her weeks earlier. Ravi blows up: “What do I care what she or anyone says or thinks?” (152). Clearly, it is the dream that matters. Srinivas excuses this as artistic freedom thinking that “A man who followed his instincts so much could not be given a detailed agenda of behavior” (160). But, far from creating a reprieve from dharma in which Ravi might discover or develop a deeper and more satisfying identity, Ravi’s insistence causes only regression. Ravi claims that his artwork is “my own. I do it in the way I want to do it. No one shall dictate to me what I should do” (163). Thus, Ravi refuses to let anyone see his painting of Shanti, protesting that it will “probably be years before I can let anyone see it” (175).

As Ravi and Sampath move toward predictable crises, Srinivas finds himself curiously detached. In the maze of twists and turns and among newly invented characters and experts at the studio, “Srinivas walked about unscathed, because he had trained himself to view it all as a mere spectator. This capacity saved him all the later shocks” (Narayan 178). When Srinivas revives *The Banner*, he is a different person who, having understood and accepted *asrama*-dharma, sees that the role he is playing as editor is not
exclusively of his own invention. Consequently, it does not require absolute freedom, total dedication, nor solipsistic self-exploration. We read that “Srinivas found himself facing, for the first time, financial problems as a reality.” Instead of assuming that an elder brother, like Sampath, would indulge his dreams — and resenting him when he does not — Srinivas “solved the problem by writing a letter to his brother, asking for the amount out of his share in the ancestral property” (198). As long as Srinivas does not risk anything in regard to his identity, he can do no more than dream for he knows he can always go home again to assume an identity in the extended family. To be truly independent, he must first be weaned from dependence on both his actual brother and his figurative brother, Sampath, who otherwise will continue to provide Srinivas with scripted identities and roles.

At the end of the novel, Srinivas is tempted to offer help to Sampath: “He wanted to ask where Sampath’s family was, what he had done with them, what he was going to do with himself, and so on. But he checked himself,” feeling “once again in danger of getting involved with him if he asked him too many questions” (Narayan 219). Srinivas still bristles at his elder brother’s authority. For example, his brother writes: “You will understand that ancestral property is after all a sacred trust, and not lose money meant for the fanciful expenditure of the individual; it really belongs to our children and their children.” Srinivas is “indignant” about “fanciful” expenditures by individuals. However, he accepts the money as a loan, not a right, vowing to “return it at the earliest possible moment” (199).

In the first _Banner_, Srinivas, like every adolescent, thought he could set the world straight. Even before he had a house of his own — replete with its symbolic associations of identity and family — he wrote an editorial, “Visions on the Shelf,” expressing his impatience for utopia. Editorials in the second _Banner_ seem to originate from Hindu classics and the process of self-knowledge that they recommend. One of Srinivas’ “outstanding editorials […] after The Banner’s rebirth,” is titled: “Nonsense – an adult occupation,” which describes how “adulthood was just a mask that people wore … but within it a man kept up the nonsense of his infancy” (Narayan 200). We cannot outgrow this, but we can control how it affects our lives by understanding how dharma works to produce those masks and games. Taking passages from the _Upanishads_ and the _Gita_, our editor contemplates that “Dynasties rose and fell” but are always reborn. “And throughout the centuries, Srinivas felt, this group was always there: Ravi with his madness, his well-wishers with their panaceas and their apparatus of cure. Half the madness was his own doing, his lack of self-knowledge” (207–8). Sooner or later, the deluded would shake “off his madness,” realizing “his true identity – though not in one birth,” or, as we might prefer to say, not by playing only one part. “The whole of eternity stretched ahead of one; there was plenty of time to shake off all follies.” Whatever roles we play, whatever dramas we are involved in do not “make the slightest difference in the long run” (208). It is all _maya_.

Finally, Srinivas turns his emerging wisdom toward Sampath whom he finds with “an intimidated look in his eyes” (Narayan 212). When Sampath takes Shanti away from the studio on what he hopes will be a honeymoon, they discover that their studio roles no longer work because there is no audience. What may have been an entrancing performance before the camera and an appreciative audience becomes boring, tedious, embarrassing, and finally, constraining.
Having failed to locate Shanti after wandering over much of south India, Sampath speculates on his chances with Sohan Lal and Somu, the movie producers, saying: “Well, I may probably try and save myself if I can interest them in a new story.” But there is unspoken tragedy in Sampath’s search for Shanti (peace). Readers wonder what he feels about his daughters, of whom he was so proud. Sampath is jobless and homeless. He has no parts to play. As he walks off into the darkness, his cigarette glows “like a ruby set in the night.” But Srinivas does not respond to the lure: “He raised his hand, flourished a final farewell, and set his face homeward” (Narayan 219) to accept dharma in place of his adolescent dreams.

At the beginning of the novel, Srinivas encountered a maze of paths. Having walked many of the roads by the end of the novel, Srinivas avoids the cul-de-sac of ultra-orthodoxy, illustrated by the old sanyasi and by Ravi’s father. He also avoids the opposite road illustrated by Ravi and Sampath who abandon dharma to indulge their desires and dreams. In reviving The Banner, Srinivas sees “his little home, the hall and all the folk there, Anderson Lane, and, in fact, Malgudi itself” as stages of Shiva Nataraja or the dance of life that is dramatically marked by the appearance of Sri Rama, the “perfect man, this incarnation of Vishnu,” leading “his devoted brother Laxman and Hanuman, the monkey-god” in the quest to return beauty (Sita) to the world (Narayan 180). Next, “the Buddha came this way, preaching his gospel of compassion.” Sri Shankara then appeared preaching “his gospel of Vedanta: the identity and oneness of God and his creatures.” Despite these avatars and teachers, Srinivas feels that struggling and errantly wandering characters, like those of the novel, are always there: “Ravi with his madness, his well-wishers with their panaceas.” He recognizes that “half the madness was his [Ravi’s] own doing, his lack of self-knowledge” (181). In the beginning, Srinivas wrote in an attempt “to set the world right” (4). In the end, he realizes that “madness or sanity, suffering or happiness seemed all the same.” Troy Wilson Organ explains that from a Hindu view, we are not called to set the world straight or to find Truth, but to appreciate or savor (rasa) our time in the world. Thus, Srinivas reflects that “whether one was mad or sane or right or wrong didn’t make the slightest difference: it was like bothering about a leaf floating on a rushing torrent – whether it was floating on its right side or wrong side” (182). This final image comes close to paraphrasing the Svetâsvatara Upanisad that declares:

Now one should know that Nature (Prakṛti) is illusion (māyā),
And that the Mighty Lord (maheśvara) is the illusion-maker (māyin; Organ 41).

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