

One Book 2008 Reader's Guide

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Welcome from Chief Librarian Louise Blalock

*“Vivid and engrossing. . . . Though the book is anchored, fascinatingly, in the daily life of Bombay, the depth of Suri's characters lifts *The Death of Vishnu* out of its sociological and cultural background, takes it beyond the confines of its particular setting, and raises it into a work of fiction that seems not only universal but absolutely cosmic.”*

That is how the writer Francine Prose describes Manil Suri's *The Death of Vishnu*, the selected 2008 One Book for Greater Hartford.

All of the books that have been selected for One Book for Greater Hartford have given us the opportunity to explore cultures that may be different than our own, ideas that challenge us, perspectives that are unfamiliar, and a chance to observe the world through the writer's eyes. Indeed, all of the books have transported us to an unfamiliar culture at the same time revealing the singular thread of humanity that connects us.

Manil Suri's star is in ascendance. The first book in his trilogy, *The Death of Vishnu*, is rich with the complex relationships of people who share a space, but not common cultural reference. Toss in the fragility of human emotions and Hindu mythological traditions, and this is yet another book that generously gives us the opportunity to discover another culture through imagination and literature.

In Manil Suri's story the mythology overlays contemporary urban life. More specifically the life of a single crowded apartment building becomes a microcosm not only of the city, but of the human condition itself.

Those of us who are city apartment or condominium dwellers will relate to the visceral descriptions of residents making space for one another, creating protective space in chaos, or claiming a piece of common space. Suburban and rural environments have their own manifestations of these conditions, of course.

Join us in reading this wonderful book and in the opening celebration at the Downtown library on Saturday, August 16 - where the foods and arts of India will be on display and for sale, in the library's atrium and terrace.

The summer and fall will be full of book-themed programs for both adults and youth, and on Friday, October 24, the highlight of One Book will take place at the Downtown library— the author's reading with Manil Suri.

I hope you'll join us for this celebration of the literary arts!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Louise Blalock". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The name "Louise" is written in a smaller, more compact script, while "Blalock" is written in a larger, more prominent script with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Acknowledgements

We want to thank our Honorary Chair, Dr. Sheenu Srinivasan, primary founder of the Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple Society in Middletown, CT.

We also want to acknowledge our founding partners, Greater Hartford Literacy Council and the Greater Hartford Arts Council.

And of course thank you to the members of the selection committee for their generous contribution of time and their thoughtful input into the selection of the One Book for Greater Hartford 2008.

Carl Guerriere, Greater Hartford Literacy Council

Ken Kahn, Greater Hartford Arts Council

Craig Kennedy, Borders Bookstore

Rev. Gary Miller, Asylum Hill Congregational Church

Ravi Shankar, Poet-in-Residence, Central Connecticut State University

Doris Sugarman, The Connecticut Forum

Virginia Vocelli, Avon Public Library

Dominique Meyers, Teen One Book representative

Coming From India...

"Coming from India, I am very familiar with diversity - we are a people divided by religion, caste, class, language, ethnicity, skin color and a host of other characteristics. Any time such diverse populations live together - be it in a city or a neighborhood or a single apartment building, there is going to be tremendous friction. The challenge is to rise above our differences, to find the common threads that run through our shared human experiences. "Unity in Diversity" is the maxim that comes to mind - we have to make this work together, since there really is no other alternative."

Manil Suri

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Manil Suri Biography

Born in 1959, in what was then Bombay, India (now Mumbai), Manil Suri came to the United States as a student at Carnegie Mellon University in 1979, where he received a Ph.D in mathematics.

He became a professor of mathematics at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in 1983. (His mathematical research is in the numerical analysis of partial differential equations.) He continues to advance through the academic ranks at the University as his star rises in the world of literature.

Suri began writing short stories in the 1980's, but was not published (aside from a short story in an obscure Bulgarian language journal) until "The Seven Circles" appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine." "The Seven Circles" was an excerpt from his first novel, *The Death of Vishnu*, which was published in 2001 by W.W. Norton, instantly becoming an international best-seller.

The Age of Shiva was published in February of 2008, and *The Search for Brahma* will follow as the final book in the trilogy.

The Death of Vishnu was a finalist for the Pen/Faulkner Award.

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Essay on Diversity

What Unites India

Some years ago, I spent a summer in Finland, working at the Helsinki University of Technology. The Finns are a remarkably orderly people – calm, low-key and well-behaved. Lunch at the university cafeteria was invariably a rather sedate affair – people quietly going about their business (which happened, at the moment, to be the ingestion of food) and only speaking when spoken to. This hour of silence every afternoon (broken only by the soft sound of chewing) became so unnerving that I started trying to stir up some excitement. I began soliciting the opinions of my co-workers on the most controversial social topics I could think of – religion, politics, race, abortion, sexuality – to see if I could strike a nerve, stumble onto differences in belief between them strong enough to provoke an argument.

What I found was that for each question, only a single person would stop eating to answer – succinctly stating the prevailing national position, while the rest nodded in agreement. There were no differences in opinion – the lunch group (and by extension the rest of the country) was reacting as a single entity, a multi-headed organism which not only responded with a unified voice, but also somehow knew whom to pick next for the role of mouthpiece. I became so obsessed with trying to find something contentious that I started doing my homework – digging up prickly questions like the country's problems with alcoholism, or reservation quotas for the small (5.5%) Swedish-speaking minority. But the response remained the same. My fantasy of Finn vs. Finn never came to fruition – they were much too homogeneous a group. An entire nation of five million bound together with essentially the same beliefs, customs, culture, language – they even look the same. What unites Finland? *Everything* does.

India, of course, is the exact antithesis – examining the population, one uncovers only differences. The various divisions in terms of class and culture, religion and language, caste and subcaste, skin tone and physical characteristics, offer a well-stocked boutique of reasons to discriminate against each other. Applying the Finnish model suggests that we should all, like an aggregation of mutually repelling particles, simply fly apart. And yet, we don't. Clearly a different paradigm is at work – a paradigm in which, paradoxically, this very smorgasbord of diversity must play a pivotal role in keeping the country together.

The phrase "Unity in diversity" comes to mind – a concept that Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, asserts is best exemplified by India. According to this philosophy, the danger of fragmentation for a highly diverse society is so acute that it is forced to develop a heightened sense of tolerance of internal differences to survive. In other words, it is the threat of our country breaking apart that keeps us united.

While there is some truth in this idea, it neither captures the full picture, nor explains the mechanism by which such unity might actually be fostered. Consider that aggregation of 1.2 billion individual particles again, many of them rural and illiterate, all of them subject to intense pressure from their own particular needs and prejudices. Surely the most immediate and compelling motivation that drives them (in fact, that drives anyone, Finns included) is self-interest. Try explaining the Wikipedia entry to a poor farmer (or, for that matter a rich businessman) – tell him how a grand social theory predicts he will rise above his own immediate needs to ensure that the flag of unity is always kept aloft. He will laugh in your face.

And yet, a model of independent entrepreneurship does not apply either. Rugged individualism in the American sense is not the order of the day. People belong to well-defined communities – clan, village, sect, *biradari* – and it is membership in these that turns out to be of primary significance. Rather than 1.2 billion separate particles, the Indian model can be thought of as organized into a much smaller number of groups. The sense of belonging within each such group is extremely strong – the individual’s social sustenance (not to mention very identity) is often entirely dependent on it. As a result, self-interest is no longer always the dominant motivator – rather, it might be subsumed into the interests of the group.

What makes these groups so attractive? What endows them with their strong sense of identity, their stability, their cohesive power? The driving force, I believe, is diversity. The groups derive their strength precisely from the inhomogeneity of the larger society from which they are drawn. While there might be several socioeconomic and evolutionary arguments favoring diversity, it is not necessarily something easy to live with. Alien customs can be surprisingly grating. People yearn to hear their own language. The natural defense against an onslaught of difference is to seek those like oneself. This is exactly what the group offers – a refuge from “The Other.” One can seek comfort in a community of individuals with the same customs, the same ideas, the same aspirations, the same background. The reaction to too much diversity, in other words, is that people organize themselves into miniature versions of Finland.

This, then, is one of the surprising effects of diversity – rather than pulling people apart, it induces them to clot together. The phenomenon is observed in various other contexts globally – witness the way so many first generation immigrants in the West retract into the most orthodox religious groups they can find, to distance themselves from the alien culture around. In India, this clotting process repeats itself at higher levels. The groups that people form, regarded now as individual entities, still find themselves awash in a sea of tremendous diversity. The same mechanism as before will now cause these *groups* to clump together in reaction – moreover, this process plays out again at still higher levels, to give a fractal hierarchy. For instance, local communities of leatherworkers might imbed themselves in a larger regional community of the same profession, which in turn might bond with other regional Dalit groups to remain afloat in the surrounding sea of non-Dalit groups.

Let me make a few points about the above model. At each stage, the primary role diversity plays is not necessarily to give birth to new conglomerations, but to provide the pressure that keeps them stable, no matter how they originated. An advantage of the model is that it helps explain why such an elaborate hierarchical structure of subcastes and castes continues to endure in India. It should be noted that significant overlap can exist between various groups and conglomerations – for instance, while an individual’s primary identification might be with a professional, familial, or caste-based group, he might also feel a sense of allegiance to larger conglomerations structured around factors like language or religion.

While individuals or their immediate low-level groups have very limited power, rising through the hierarchy, we eventually reach conglomerations large enough to have political clout (for example, the group of all Dalits, of all Muslims, of Gujaratis, of Punjabis, etc.). How does “Unity in Diversity” apply at this level? Is the Wikipedia explanation finally sufficient? Does the size of these groups make them more sensitive, more responsible, ready to stifle their own needs and desires for the greater good of the country?

The answer is that groups, like individuals, also tend to act in their own self-interest, rather than out of nobility or altruism. If the membership of these large groups was economically stultified, and there were clear advantages to secession, then we would see vigorous campaigns for it played out all over the nation. But the fact is that people’s lives in India have been improving – slowly, it is true, but steadily – as most indicators (poverty, rate of literacy, the UN’s human development index) from the past three decades show. In addition, the boom of the last several years has infused sections of the population with a new optimism about the future, even if it might not yet be in their grasp. There does not seem to be a glaring economic imperative, either now or in the recent past, for a group to give up on India and strike out on its own.

When such secessionist ideas do arise, however, diversity plays an important role in damping them out. Recall how the top-level conglomerations arose in our model – through the combination of “building block” groups at lower levels. As we ascend this hierarchy of groups from the smallest to the largest, we can expect an increasing amount of variation in background, class, culture, religion. The fact that most individuals end up belonging to several different conglomerations contributes to this variation. The groups at the top, the ones large enough to effect political change, are the least homogeneous – consequently, they will generally have constituents with divergent aims and interests. Uniting all these constituents behind any action, particularly one geared towards radical change, is very difficult. A good example is the secession drive for Khalistan – the fact that the population of Punjab was so divided in terms of religion, class and economic well-being was an important factor in gutting the movement.

There is another way in which diversity promotes unity at this top level – by providing a tangible, flesh and blood “Other.” Each group depends on this “Other” to define itself, to reinforce its own identity. Muslims distinguish themselves from the idol-worshipping Hindus, Hindus from the beef-eating Muslims. Higher castes need the lower ones to set

themselves apart from, through claims of being purer, more religious, more spiritually evolved, and so on. Punjabis wake up every morning and thank their stars they are not born Gujarati or Marathi or Sindhi or (fill in the blank). Within the nervous system circuitry of each group is the realization that to remain relevant, to perpetuate its very existence, the compressive force from this “Other” is essential. Break off to strike out on your own, and there is no longer the pressure to bind the building block constituents together, there is no longer a *raison d’être*. It is therefore in each group’s self-interest to maintain an equilibrium of two opposing actions. First, to draw their populations away from other groups by emphasizing the differences, thus engendering internal solidarity. Simultaneously, to lean towards the same groups as a corrective measure, so that the mutually beneficial union (marked with no matter how much internecine hostility) is not completely destroyed.

One vital element not mentioned yet in this picture is democracy. This is the crucial release valve which stabilizes the entire model. Disgruntled groups who feel they have been shortchanged know they have the opportunity to express their ire at the polls – they do not have to break away. It could be argued, therefore, that democracy is what really keeps the country intact – by enfranchising all individuals and groups, and providing them with a time-tested method of effecting change.

But suppose we delve a little deeper and ask *why* this form of government has worked so well in India. What gives Indian democracy its robustness, its longevity? As Edward Luce argues in his recent book, *In Spite of the Gods*, it is once again the diversity of the population that works behind the scenes to ensure democracy endures. The country, quite simply, is much too diverse for other forms of government to take root. “Far from endangering democracy, India’s pluralism makes democracy essential,” Luce writes. So even if we accept that democracy is one of the most important factors in fostering unity, we can still trace its continuing survival back to our old friend, diversity.

Sixty years ago, on the eve of Indian independence, Nehru made his famous “Tryst with Destiny” speech. “A new star arises, the star of freedom in the East,” he declared, but it was actually millions of tiny stars that arose that evening; that, at the stroke of midnight, were launched into the sky and set free. The usual Newtonian rules of gravitation did not apply to these stars – instead, what kept them from flying apart on their own independent trajectories was a much more complex force field. A field which drew them together by pulling them apart, a field which depended on their very diversity to ensure unity.

In the first decade of this new millenium, it is important to remind ourselves of what continues to keep India aloft – the millions of attractions and repulsions taking place between its multiplying stars, between the clusters and constellations they form, between its galaxies both massive and small. The Finnish model will never apply – the romanticized ideal of all these components united in rosy, frictionless harmony. Rather, what’s critical is to safeguard the rights, enfranchisement and continuing inclusion of each component, for the purely selfish reason of continued stability. Only then will India be assured of moving as one as it continues its cosmic voyage towards new trysts with destiny.

Manil Suri

From the 60th Independence Day Anniversary issue of *India Today* (August 20, 2007)

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Q & A with the Author

1. Were any of the characters in *The Death of Vishnu* directly inspired by people from your childhood?

Vishnu certainly was – he was a fixture of my childhood, sleeping on the steps, lolling around drunk whenever he had the money to spend on alcohol, and finally, during a trip I made back in 1994, dying an ignominious death on his landing. We didn't exchange more than an occasional "hello" though, so when it came to creating him as a full character, I had to use my imagination. My family shared a kitchen with the landlord's family, and there were fights galore – a definite inspiration for the characters of Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani. They had to be nothing like our real neighbors, though, since my parents still lived there when the book came out.

2. Are there any traditions and customs from your early life in India that you brought with you when you came to the United States?

I'm sure there were some, but I quickly jettisoned them. I felt a tremendous urge to fit in, to become Americanized, to not stick out with my clothes or accent or traditions. Part of this came from the very westward looking atmosphere I grew up in – a large part of the middle class in India has always been crazy about things British or American. It was really only when I started writing *The Death of Vishnu* that I rediscovered the country of my birth, felt the strong attachment, the memories, the culture that had shaped me while growing up. And when the book was hailed as a uniquely Indian book when it was released there (and I as a truly Indian author) – well, that's when the true homecoming occurred.

3. Are there any similarities in how you approach your academic and writing careers?

I've been trying to bridge the gap, by thinking up activities that might combine the two very different streams. For instance, when I go to writing colonies, instead of giving a reading from my fiction (as is traditional), I deliver a talk on mathematics instead. I even surprised some audience members at the 2006 International Literature Festival in Berlin by giving them a talk on infinity. Since I meet so many non-mathematicians, I feel I'm in a unique position to show people that they can, in fact, follow the call of both their left and right brain.

4. What is your writing discipline?

I'm good when I'm really into a piece, but it's hell getting to that stage. For instance, although *The Death of Vishnu* took five years to complete, about half of that was done while on a four week stint at a writing colony in Virginia – I was really cooking then. *The Age of Shiva*, my new novel, took even longer – I did a calculation based on the final word count and found I had written 64 words a day on average (64.19 to be precise). I tend to write better in the mornings, before breakfast, especially when school is in session.

5. What kind of detail do you know about a character before you begin to write about his or her interactions with other characters?

In *The Death of Vishnu*, I knew what I wanted for the characters on each floor – the building was supposed to represent the various stages of reincarnation in Hindu theory, so they had to be more spiritually developed, more detached from worldly attractions, as you ascended. I then built the characters based on these requirements. In *The Age of Shiva*, this is again the approach I tried to follow, but it failed spectacularly. One of the characters basically took over, and it became her book (rather than her son's) – as a writer, I could only follow her voice, since it was so compelling.

6. Do you still experience a “liminal” state, where a person leaves one culture or society and enters another?

Less and less. I now visit India three times a year to see my mother and so I can slip from one country to the other without any culture shock. This was a big problem in the beginning – not in terms of coming to America, but *going back* to India for vacations. Each time I returned, the country seemed to have changed dramatically.

7. What do you read when you are on vacation?

I read mostly international fiction – a lot of it Indian, just to see what other Indian authors are writing. There are so many young authors writing these days, and it's always wonderful to discover a new one (Altaf Tyrewala, the author of a recent amazing novel set in Bombay called *No God in Sight* comes to mind). Some of my favorite authors are Kazuo Ishiguro, Haruki Murakami, Orhan Pamuk, Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri.

8. Are you working on another book?

I'm working on the third part of my trilogy, called *The Search for Brahma*. Originally, the idea was that *The Death of Vishnu* would presage destruction to come, since Vishnu is the caretaker of the universe in Hindu mythology. *The Age of Shiva* would then represent the period when Shiva's influence would rule – he is the second god in the Hindu trinity and represents destruction. Brahma, the creator, forms the third part of the trinity – he is the one who recreates the universe and continues the cycle. The trilogy has now really become more about India, though. The first book gave a snapshot of the country in roughly contemporary times. The book just released (*The Age of Shiva*) shows, in the background, how the country got there from the time of independence. And the Brahma book is going to explore the question of what might happen next, in the near future – how will India's story end, and how will it regenerate?

9. I understand you cook. What do you cook for yourself when no one else is around?

I used to cook very elaborate meals, with lots of experimentation (e.g. French-Indian fusion), for myself when I was single. I still do that, but now only when my partner is around to be a taster for my experiments. For myself I usually make very simple food now – for instance, the day I settled on my contract for *The Death of Vishnu*, I came home and celebrated by scrambling an egg for dinner.

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Historical Timeline

- In the conventional narrative, Indian history begins with the birth of the Indus Valley Civilization (3000 – 1500 BC), followed by the arrival of the Aryans (2000 BC).
- Hinduism is generally dated to around the beginning of the Christian era although some elements are clearly drawn from the Indus Valley civilization.
- In the 4th century BC, large parts of India were united under the emperor Ashoka. Ashoka who converted to Buddhism, and it is in his reign that Buddhism first spread to other parts of Asia.
- Islam first came to India in the 8th century AD and by the 11th century AD had firmly established itself in India as a political force – the North Indian dynasties were succeeded by the Mughal Empire under which India once again experienced a large measure of political unity.
- The European presence in India dates to the 16th century.
- It is in the very early part of the 18th century that the Mughal Empire began to disintegrate, paving the way for regional states.
- England emerges victorious in the battle for supremacy in India, with the subsequent proclaiming of Queen Victoria as Empress of India on January 1, 1877.
- By the early part of the 20th century a nationalist movement emerged; and, by 1919-1920, Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi was considered the leader of this effort. Successive campaigns had the effect of driving the British out of India in 1947, but not before they partitioned the country, carving out the Muslim-majority state of Pakistan from Hindu-majority India.
- Pakistan, following the 1947 partitioning of the sub-continent, was given two land masses, one east and one west. The two “wings” were separated by more than one thousand miles. The eastern wing of Pakistan later became Bangladesh in a 1971 war for independence.

- This division of the sub-continent – inhabited by 360 million people in 1947 – led to ethnic cleansing in certain regions. This resulted in the deaths of a half million to 1 million people, and the displacement of some 12 million.
- The first prime minister of independent India was Jawaharlal Nehru, who held office from 1947 until his death in 1964.
- Apart from a short period of two years from 1975-77, when an internal emergency was imposed by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and constitutional liberties were suspended, India has been a parliamentary democracy.

Sources for this timeline include:

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/mainhist.html>

<http://www.orgs.ttu.edu/saofbangladesh/history.htm>

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/india/1877empressvictoria.html>

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Discussion Questions

1. In the first scene, Mrs. Asrani's dilemma is whether and how much tea to leave for Vishnu. "Besides, who knew what sort of repercussions would rain down upon her if she failed to fulfill this daily ritual?" (page 14) This is one of many moments when superstition, belief, or lack thereof, factor into a character's action. Are there any superstitions that you are inclined to act upon?
2. What could have been a friendship between the two Hindu families, according to Mr. Pathak, was ruined by the sharing of one kitchen. (page 35) What are the hardships of this arrangement? What else contributes to the friction between the Pathaks and Asranis?
3. At some point in the novel, nearly every adult character tells a part of his or her own story. Are they trustworthy narrators? Why or why not?
4. Much of the self-reflection and story-telling that occurs within the present action of the story has to do with marriage. What indications are there that any of the relationships are successful? Why? What does a successful relationship mean to you?
5. The heroines, romantic leads and villains of the multitude of movies she has seen inform how Kavita acts in her own life. Does that influence help or harm her?
6. How does your level of familiarity with Indian history, Hinduism and Islam influence your reading of *The Death of Vishnu*?
7. Why is Mr. Jalal obsessed with experiencing faith? The power of his yearning is stronger than the intellectual pursuits that drove his prior life, even leading him to inflict acts of violence upon himself. Did his "awakening" represent an authentic spiritual change for him, or was his previous adherence to the doctrine of reason an equally faith-based position?

8. What is the significance of Mr. Jalal being the one who perceives Vishnu as a god?

9. Who is Padmini to Vishnu? Despite his unfailing devotion to her, he still laughs heartily at the absurdity of his own romantic fantasies when they steal the Jalal's car and drive to Lonavala. (page 92) Was it just physical attraction that kept him returning to her, or something else?

10. At what point do you believe Vishnu to have died?

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Characters

Those who live in the apartment building, or work near it:

Vishnu (a drunk who occupies the landing between the ground and first floor, and does odd jobs for the families in the building)

Tall Ganga (promised the landing and her paid duties to Vishnu when she left to live with her son)

Short Ganga (hired to deliver the milk and other chores when Vishnu was found to be incompetent)

Radiowalla (Nathuram) lives on the landing above Vishnu

Cigarette-walla (Romu) (cigarette seller)

Paan-walla (one who sells Paan, a betel leaf confection)

Thanu Lal (lives on the top landing)

Mrs. Asrani (Aruna)

Mr. Asrani (Manohar)

Kavita (their 18 year old daughter)

Mrs. Pathak (Usha)

Mr. Pathak

Veeru (their eldest son who is away at college)

Rajan (younger son, about Shyamu's age)

Mrs. Jalal (Arifa)

Mr. Jalal (Ahmed)

Salim (their only child, who is about Kavita's age)

Mr. Taneja (Vinod)

Mrs. Taneja (Sheetal) his wife who died many years ago

Others:

Padmini (a prostitute whom Vishnu loves)

Nafeesa (Mrs. Asrani's sister who takes her to a shrine to break the evil spell on her husband)

Swammiji (guru of the ashram Mr. Taneja visits)

The Kitty Party participants:

Mrs. Jaiswal (Sheila) (controls the desirable kitty parties; long ago appeared in a couple of films; her son Rojit goes to school in the United States)

Mrs. Bawa (mentioned as one who has been banished from the card game circuit)

Mrs. Mirchandani

Mrs. Ganesh

Those involved in Kavita's possible marriage:

Mrs. Lalwani (the one who brings Pran and Kavita together)

Pran (the prospective husband, an engineer)

Mrs. Kotwani (his mother)

Members of the board of the Greater Bombay Social Cooperative:

Mr. Wazir

Mr. Kailash

Mrs. Bhagwati (wealthy widow who proposes to Mr. Taneja)

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Words of Interest

COOKING & FOOD

- Barfi: diamond-shaped sweet dessert, sometimes decorated with an ultra thin layer of silver foil on the top
- Bhang: intoxicant, sometimes mixed with milk for consumption
- Brinjal: eggplant
- Bhajia: vegetable fritters (similar to pakoras)
- Chaat: Indian fast food, spicy snacks
- Chameli: jasmine
- *Chapati*: thin unleavened flatbread
- Ghee: clarified butter, used as a cooking medium
- Golgappa: popular snack item, brought from street vendors – a kind of chaat
- Gulab Jamun: dessert of fried cheese balls in golden syrup
- Gur: soft, unrefined sugar
- Halwai: one of many names for a caste of sweet-makers
- Jackfruit: large, heavy, intensely sweet tropical fruit
- Kadai: a round cooking vessel
- Kulfi: ice cream made with boiled milk
- Laddoo: round, yellow walnut-sized confection, often used as a ceremonial dessert
- Masala: a traditional spice mixture
- Paan: a “chew” of spices and seeds often wrapped in betel leaf
- Pakoras: deep-fried fritters made with vegetables
- Paneer: homemade Indian cheese
- Papdi: popular North Indian sweet
- Paratha: a flatbread, often stuffed with vegetables
- Pedas: a milk-and-sugar sweet, usually in the form of a yellow disk
- Pista: pistachio
- Pomfret: flat diamond-shaped fish, prized for its texture and taste
- Samosa: deep-fried triangular Indian snack of dough stuffed with spiced vegetables
- Thali: a selection of small dishes of regional foods served on a round metal tray. The tray itself is often called a thali
- Tiffin: light meals often packed in stacked tin boxes. The boxes themselves are often referred to as tiffin
- Tulsi: often called “holy” basil, which is a mainstay of the Ayurvedic healing system

CLOTHING & ACCESSORIES

- Attar: a perfume oil made by the distillation of flower petals
- Benarisi sari: One of the most expensive types of saris, from Benares
- Burkha: a full-cover robe or dress worn by Muslim women who maintain purda, the screening of women's bodies from public observation
- Dupatta: a woman's long scarf, usually worn with a salwar kameez
- Ghungroo: anklet festooned with bells
- Gunghat: veil, often the end of a sari draped over the head
- Kurta: tunic-like man's shirt
- Salwar kameez: long tunic (kameez) and loose pants (salwar) worn by women of north Indian origin

TITLES & FORMS OF ADDRESS

- Beta: son (also used to address boys who are not necessarily one's own child)
- Beti: daughter (also used to address girls who are not necessarily one's own child)
- Dhobi: person who washes clothes
- Fakir: holy man
- Ganga: female servant who performs domestic chores for several households
- Jamandarni: sweeper, cleaner of toilets
- Jee or Ji: suffix added to a name to show respect, sometimes used by itself
- Mem: a white memsahib
- Memsahib: a form of address used for higher-ranking or higher-class women; also, a general reference to such a woman
- Mullah: Muslim religious man
- Namaste: greeting performed with folded hands, literally means "I bow to you"
- Sadhu: Hindu holy man
- Sahib: a form of address used for higher-ranking or higher-class men; also, a general reference to such a man
- Salaam: formal salutation
- Shrimati: wife
- Yogi: one who practices prolonged yoga or asceticism to gain control over the body and mind

GODS, MYTHOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY & RELIGION

- Amavas: a day with a moonless night, considered inauspicious by many
- Ambika: goddess of mangoes, one of Lakshmi's forms
- Ananta: "the endless one", the snake on whose coils Vishnu rests and goes to sleep as the universe comes to an end
- Arjun: one of the Pandava brothers, a key figure in the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad-Gita
- Avatar: an incarnation of a god or goddess
- Bhagavad-Gita: one of the holiest Hindu texts, here Krishna, disguised as a charioteer, explains the goals of human existence to Arjun
- Bhajan: Hindu devotional song
- Brahma: part of the primary Hindu trinity of gods, the creator, who breathes out the universe to make it come into existence
- Brahmin: highest (priestly) caste
- Dharma: sacred duty
- Diwali: Hindu festival of lights celebrated with fireworks; the start of the Hindu new year, and the night of the goddess Lakshmi descends to earth
- Ganesh: elephant god
- Garuda: gold-colored mythical eagle who carries Vishnu and Lakshmi to Vaikuntha, their heaven in the sky
- Hanuman: monkey god
- Indra: god of the heavens, comparable to Zeus
- Kalki: Vishnu's final incarnation, and also the name for the white horse he will ride when he descends to earth to eradicate evil and end the current cycle of existence
- Kaliyuga: the current age we live in, which is the last of the four eras of this universe; this is the age when goodness disappears from the world and the universe is slowly inhaled back into Brahma's nostrils
- Karma: actions and deeds that will lead to consequences in this or future lifetimes
- Krishna: One of the most revered of Hindu Deities, celebrated both for his mischievous love of life and his divine power and wisdom; also an incarnation of Vishnu
- Lakshmi: goddess of fortune, consort of Vishnu, who accompanies him from incarnation to incarnation in her many forms

- Maharaja: provincial king; also the cartoon mascot of Air India
- Matsya: Vishnu's first incarnation, a fish that instructed Manu to save humanity by building a ship; Matsya towed the ship to safety when the deluge came
- Maya: the illusion that characterizes all transitory existence in Hindu philosophy, with only the spirit being permanent
- Namaz: prayer performed by Muslims five times each day
- Nazar: curse or spell, evil eye
- Om: sacred syllable used in meditation, which combines the spiritual energy of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva
- Radha: incarnation of Lakshmi, Krishna's beloved milkmaid
- Rama: an incarnation of Vishnu
- Rukhmini: incarnation of Lakshmi as Krishna's wife
- Saraswati: goddess of the arts, consort of Brahma
- Shiva: part of the primary Hindu trinity of gods, the destroyer. Unlike Vishnu, Shiva (being an ascetic) prefers to distance himself from the world
- Trinity: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. These are not separate gods but three faces of the same god, which is why the Hindu trinity is called the "Trimurti" (three forms)
- Varuna: god of the ocean
- Vishnu: part of the primary Hindu trinity of gods, the preserver or caretaker of the universe, who must balance everything that exists, and whose constant action keeps everything running; worshipped in many forms all over India, especially as Rama and Krishna

FESTIVALS & HOLIDAYS

- Bakr-Eid: Muslim festival with a goat being traditionally sacrificed
- Divali: Hindu festival of lights celebrated with fireworks; the start of the Hindu new year, and the night the goddess Lakshmi descends to earth
- Holi: Hindu festival during which people are playfully doused with brightly colored powders
- Mela: a gathering, a fair
- Muharram: Muslim holy day to commemorate the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain in the battle of Karbala
- Ramzan: The Muslim fasting month (Ramadan)
- Roza: daily fast during Ramzan

MISCELLANEOUS

- Ambassador: the first car to be manufactured in India, the iconic Indian automobile
- Bandar: monkey
- Beedi: also bidi, a hand-rolled, flavored, inexpensive cigarette
- Charpoy: cot made of woven rope
- Dacoit: bandit or robber
- Ghat: steps leading down to a river, also the bank of a river used for trading, bathing and cremation
- Irani Hotels: old-fashioned tea shops started by Iranis who immigrated to Bombay in the 1920's and 1930's
- Jambul: tree with small purple fruit
- Lathi: a traditional form of armed martial art, also refers to the long piece of bamboo that is used as a weapon.
- Loban: a type of aromatic resinous wood
- Mandap: wedding platform
- Paisa: coin, one-hundredth the value of a rupee
- Pataka: firecracker
- Phuljadi: sparkler
- Rupee: primary unit of Indian currency
- Tamasha: a traditional bawdy folk play, a fuss, spectacle
- Walla: suffix meaning "one associated with", as in the paanwalla (one who sells paan) or radiowalla (the one with the radio)

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Youth and Young Adult Activities

Programs for Children

Parent-child relationships are an important element in *The Death of Vishnu*, and are a subject which even young children can discuss and share. Give this discussion an added connection to the novel by basing it on books which reflect Indian culture.

Open a discussion for very young children (ages three to five) with an introduction such as:

“We (adults) are reading a book about a far-away country, India. In India, there are holidays that are different from the holidays that many of us celebrate, food that is different from the food many of us eat, and clothes which are different from the clothes many of us wear. Of course, many things in India are also the same as they are here. For example, mothers and fathers love their children. One mother in the book we are reading loves her little boy, Vishnu, very much. On a rainy night, they play a game where she guesses what animal he is pretending to be. Vishnu pretends that he is a fish, growing bigger and bigger all the time. Here is something that happens as they play: “His mother scoops him up into her lap. ‘Oh, my – you are a big fish. How happy you might make some fisherman if he caught such a big fish in his net.’”

Ask the children if they play games like that in their house. Encourage group participation around information that is shared. For example, if someone says he pretends he is a lion, ask everyone to stretch and roar and show their big teeth for a minute.

Next, give a dramatic reading of Jessica Souhami’s *No Dinner!: The Story of the Old Woman and the Pumpkin* (Marshall Cavendish, 1999). The children will enjoy imitating the animal “parts” from this boldly illustrated retelling of a popular Indian folktale, in which a grandmother outwits a wolf, a bear, and a tiger. Take a moment to point out that the grandmother is wearing an orange sari, or wrapped dress, with a pink choli, or fitted blouse. Then, read *My Mother’s Sari* (NorthSouth Books, 2006), written by Sandhya Rao, and illustrated by Nina Sabnani. This sweet story of a girl playing with her mother’s saris begins and ends with clear, illustrated directions for wrapping one. Try following them with one of the girls present, using an actual sari or a six-yard length of light-weight cloth. Finish with a taste of mango lassi for all, multiplying the recipe which follows as needed.

Easy Mango Lassi

Blend together the following ingredients, and serve immediately.

1 cup yogurt
1 cup canned mango pulp, chilled
¼ cup cold milk
2 tablespoons sugar

For older children (elementary grades), add a map or globe to your introductory remarks. Encourage children to find India, and compare it in location and size to the United States. Continue with the introduction, quoting the same short passage from *The Death of Vishnu*. Follow it with one of the lovely animal stories found in most compilations of traditional Indian folklore, such as “The Loyal Parrot” from *Jasmine and Coconuts: South Indian Tales* (Libraries Unlimited, 1999), by Cathy Spagnoli and Paramasivam Samanna. Then read *Mama’s Saris* (Little, Brown, 2007), a picture book for older readers by Pooja Makhijani, illustrated by Elena Gomez. In this story, a mother looks at her saris with her young daughter, and remembers the special occasions on which each were worn. Finish with the sari-wrapping activity and mango lassi, as above.

Program for Middle School Students

Middle school students may be introduced to another important aspect in *The Death of Vishnu*, the possibility of perfect devotion. This is illustrated in the novel through the marriage of Vinod and Sheetal Taneja, and connects strongly to the story told in the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*.

The concept of perfect devotion could be introduced through this passage from the novel, which follows Sheetal’s death, and refers to Vinod.

“His mother tried several times to get him remarried. But he had closed the door to that possibility. He felt he had already experienced whatever there was to be experienced between a husband and wife, that he had shared a part of himself with another person in a way that was too profound to be duplicated.”

After reading this passage, ask the students if they know of any other instances of deep devotion. The story of Ruth and Naomi, from the Old Testament of the Bible, might be one example given. Then, introduce the *Ramayana*, which tells the story of the unbreakable bond forged between Vishnu’s avatar, Lord Rama, his wife, Lady Sita, and the monkey warrior, Lord Hanuman. Select an outline of the *Ramayana* prepared for young readers, such as “Rama Rescues Sita” in *Hindu Stories* (Picture Window, 2006), by Anita Ganeri, or *The Story of Divaali* (Barefoot Books, 2002), by Jatinder Verma. Divide responsibility for reading the story between those present. When they have finished, discuss who is devoted to whom, and how that devotion is expressed.

As the story is the basis for the Hindu celebration of Divaali (also spelled Divali or Diwali), an appropriate conclusion to the event would be the sharing of a platter of traditional sweets, such as burfee, (also spelled barfee) and an activity such as making rangoli patterns. Directions and illustrations of these patterns, created with colored rice flour in front of homes and shops to welcome a visit from the goddess Lakshmi, can be found in many books about India and Indian holidays, including *Dilip Kadowala’s Divali* (Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 1998).

Discussion with Teens

Victor Turner, a British anthropologist, explored a concept known as ‘liminality.’ This idea had referred to the transition phase of a rite of passage. Turner expanded that notion and said that this liminal state, when individuals had left one society and were about to enter another, was characterized by seclusion, humility, and ambiguity.

The idea of liminality is found in *The Death of Vishnu*, perhaps most clearly as Vishnu lives and dies in a stairwell, as well as in other novels that focus on a protagonist in transition. *Born Confused* (Scholastic, 2002), a novel for young adults by Tanuja Desai Hidier, centers on a young Indian American woman who feels trapped between her family’s heritage and that of her friends and peers. Lala Dimple, the main character, frequently feels in a state of limbo, unsure of whether she belongs in one context or another. As she learns more about her family’s culture, she leaves this liminal or transitional state and becomes fully involved in what she refers to as the “South Asian scene.”

Readers young and old can share a discussion regarding important transitions or states of liminality – whether they be from one culture to another or from one stage of life to the next. Think about these questions as you discuss commonalities between *The Death of Vishnu* and *Born Confused*:

1. In *Born Confused*, Lala comments that her peers misunderstand her because she is “too Indian,” and that her parents misunderstand her because she is “too American.” She says, “Sometimes I was too Indian in America, yes, but in India, I was definitely not Indian enough.” (p. 11)

What does Lala mean by ‘too Indian,’ and ‘not Indian enough’? How does she think that people perceive her in each setting? What influences how people see her – the way she dresses? the way she talks? the way she eats?

2. As discussed above, Lala goes through a liminal phase in *Born Confused*. What are some signs that she is exiting this phase toward the end of the book? What major changes occur in her life as she accepts her dual identity, and what do these mean for her?

3. One of Lala’s cousins, still in India, is entering into an arranged marriage. This forces Lala to think about the differences between what is acceptable in the United States and what is acceptable in India. What would you do if a relative were entering an arranged marriage? Would you object?

4. Several of the clearest examples of the liminal state in *Born Confused* occur when Lala is watching her best friend, Gwyn (a white American) interact with Karsh (her American-Indian crush). Gwyn tries taking on an Indian identity in order to impress Karsh, and Lala feels like an outsider as she watches. Her voice becomes more and more removed as she watches them together.

Why does Gwyn feel the need to “become Indian” to impress Karsh? Why does Lala feel jealous when Gwyn wears Indian clothes and cooks traditional Indian foods? How does she react, and would you feel the same way?

5. Lala decides to immerse herself in her heritage, and spends days reading about Indian culture and religion. Does this make her 'more Indian,' as she seems to hope? Does it help her move out of her liminal state – from denial and embarrassment regarding her roots to pride and awareness?

6. Lala tells Gwyn, "...I can't tell whether I'm Indian or American half the time. I don't know how I'm supposed to act, who I'm supposed to relate to, where I fit in. I don't know how to bring anything together. To be myself."

Have you ever felt this way? If you moved here from another place, or have friends or family who immigrated, can you sympathize with Lala's feelings? How do you figure out how to fit in, or to be yourself? How can you make the transition from one culture to another?

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Suggested Reading

The Age of Shiva by Manil Suri (2008)

Animal's People by Indra Sinha (2008)

The Elephanta Suite by Paul Theroux (2007)

An Equal Music by Vikram Seth (1999)

A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry (1996)

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy (1997)

Madras on Rainy Days by Samina Ali (2004)

The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri (2003)

Sacred Games by Vikram Chandra (2007)

Shalimar the Clown by Salman Rushdie (1998)

Yoga Hotel: Stories by Maura Moynihan (2003)

Classical Dances and Costumes of India by Kay Ambrose, introduction by Ram Gopal (1951)

Daughter of the Ganges: A Memoir by Asha Miró; translated by Jamal Mahjoub (2006)

The Elephant, the Tiger, and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India, the Emerging 21st-Century Power by Shashi Tharoor (2007)

India: From Midnight to the Millennium by Shashi Tharoor (1997)

India: Land of Celebration [photography by] Rupinder Khullar (2005)

My Bombay Kitchen: Traditional and Modern Parsi Home Cooking by Niloufer Ichaporia King (2007)

The Sari by Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller (2003)

Snakes and Ladders: Glimpses of Modern India by Gita Mehta (1997)

Uncut Cloth [Saris, Shawls and Sashes] by Nasreen Askari and Liz Arthur (1999)

Suggested Films

Bride & Prejudice (2004)

A Bollywood take on the Jane Austen comedy of manners. Stars Aishwarya Rai in her first English-speaking role. UK/USA. Dir. by Gurinder Chadha. Available from Touchstone Home Video.

Deewaar (1975)

Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan stars in this classic melodrama about two brothers whose lives take very different paths. India. Dir. by Yash Chopra. Available from Eros International.

Devdas (1955)

This story follows the ill-fated romance between childhood sweethearts from different classes. The most critically-acclaimed of the four film versions of Sarat Chandra's novel. India. Dir. by Bimal Roy. Available from Ismak.

Devdas (2002)

One of the more recent film versions of the classic novel - this one starring Bollywood favorites Aishwarya Rai and Shah Rukh Khan. India. Dir. by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Available from Eros International.

Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (1995)

Bollywood blockbuster (ran in theaters for 600 weeks – that's more than 11 years, a world record) starring Shah Rukh Khan as a young man attempting to stop the pre-arranged marriage of the woman he loves (played by actress Kajol). India. Dir. by Aditya Chopra. Available from Yash Raj Films.

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998)

Bollywood stars Shah Rukh Khan, Kajol, and Rani Mukherjee team up in this film with a bittersweet twist on the classic love triangle theme. India. Dir. by Karan Johar. Available from Yash Raj Films.

The Namesake (2006)

The son of Indian immigrants struggles with reconciling his family's traditional values with his own Americanization. Based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. India/USA. Dir. by Mira Nair. Available from Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Pakeezah (1971) This film classic about a courtesan's search for love was a decade in the making. Lead actress Meena Kumari passed away shortly after the film's release. India. Dir. by Kamal Amrohi. Available from Ismak.

Sholay (1975)

An all-star cast is just one of the many spectacular attributes of this classic adventure film. India. Dir. by Ramesh Sippy. Available from Eros International.

Veer Zaara (2004)

Shah Rukh Khan, Preity Zinta, and Rani Mukherjee star in this popular love story about the relationship between an Indian man and a Pakistani woman. India. Dir. by Yash Chopra. Available from Yash Raj Films.

*Most audiovisual materials (videos, DVDs, etc.) purchased or borrowed are for home use only. Be aware that if you use them for a public program you must first get permission, called **Public Performance Rights**, from the copyright holder. A librarian can help you determine who to ask.*

Most titles are available at the Hartford Public Library.

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Suggested Web Sites

About the Author:

<http://www.manilsuri.com/suri-bio.htm>

Biography of Manil Suri

About the Book:

<http://www.harpercollins.com/author/authorExtra.aspx?&isbn13=9780060004385&displayType=readingGuide>

Book club reading guide

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2001/03/25/stories/13250671.htm>

Living and dying in suburban Bombay

About India:

<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/intoc.html>

Library of Congress Country Study

<http://india.gov.in/knowindia.php>

National Portal of India: Know India

About Hindu Mythology:

<http://www.bartleby.com/181/372.html>

Age of Fable: Vols. I & II: Stories of Gods and Heroes. Hindu Mythology.

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