

[New Angles On Angels](#)

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New Angles On Angels

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"Angels," the front page headlines of the May 12th Wall Street Journal announced to the Bhuloka's bulls and bears, "Long Unemployed, Now Have Their Work to Do." That's right, people are putting angels to work in their lives, notably as guardians. Evangelistic ministers like Sister Mary Lucy Astuto are preaching the praises of the celestials as real, not theological, beings, and people are listening. Angel seminars are fully booked and books on angels are squeezing crystal healing manuals off the shelves. Consider the success of A Book on Angels by Sophy Burnham, first published by Ballantine in 1990 and already in its seventeenth printing! The marketers at Ballantine have seen the light. They plan an angel calendar, an angel post-card, and angel-of-the-week diary and a book instructing the uninitiated just how to talk with angels. Then there are the movies, dozens of movies, big-time movies like Heaven Can Wait, Almost an Angel, Ghost and more. This is not a movement of puny or paltry proportions. It's sizable; one is tempted to say celestial.

The scale of interest is directly proportional to the neglect angels have suffered in the past 300 years. About that time, the spiritual doubt and disbelief of science cast a dark cloud over this green-blue world, dispelling the incorporeal light of subtle beings, overshadowing all credence and credibility in any non-physical reality. This happened, in part, because science replaced the millennia-old sacred universe with a mechanistic model. Everything could be explained, it warranted, by simple laws of physics. The customs lay revealed before scientific scrutiny and God was summarily dismissed from the heavens, apparently taking all the angels with Him.

In Oxford, England, in 1988, I asked Svetlana Savitskaya for her explanation of a remarkable encounter she and five other Soviet astronauts had while orbiting the earth in their Soyuz 7 space station. They had all reported seeing a blinding light

and "seven giant figures in the form of humans, but with wings and mistlike halos as in the classic depiction of angels. They appeared to be hundreds of feet tall...We were truly overwhelmed...They were smiling as though they shared as though they shared a glorious secret." Hindu scriptures have long proclaimed that certain devas inhabit the region between the earth and the moon, so I was eager to hear more of the space-travelers' encounter. Sadly, Svetlana parroted the party line, offering cautiously that astronauts "work under great stress in space and psychologists are inquiring into the reasons" for such phenomena. Science had convinced her and five others that their shared vision was an occupational affliction, an hallucination.

As science gained ascendancy, most of the educated human race stopped believing in angels. It was a worldwide epidemic of disbelief. People stopped seeing angels, or at least stopped telling about it. "Seeing things" became a synonym for being crazy, so the best strategy was to keep such encounters to yourself and loved ones.

But in recent times the realization that the world is sacred is returned. Like an old watch, the scientific, clockwork model of the cosmos is breaking down. Science is now seen as just one view of our existence, no longer the only view and certainly not the most profound. Science itself is speaking - ok, murmuring - of a new vision, one that allows a sentient world, called Gaia. It is this rediscovery of a sacred universe that has triggered the renaissance of angels.

A Book on Angels notes these beings of light are always warm, helpful and filled with love. They have their duties, much of which is to convey messages (the Greek root means "messenger"), helpful little things like waking up drowsy drivers and keeping day-dreaming skiers from flying off cliffs. The book examines in elaborate detail the Christian, Muslim and Judaic perceptions about angels. But then author Burnham - who told me lovingly about her Guru, Maharaji, a married mystic in Jaipur - asks, "Are there Hindu angels?" Her answer is, I don't really know, apparently not many. Maybe such intermediaries are less needed in polytheistic faiths where the Gods themselves appear. "In India," she notes, "people don't see angels. They see God." There is much truth in that last statement, for visions of the One Divine are common in India. But no angels in Hinduism? I gasped.

Behold the Indian village, more populated by devatas - those denizens of a subtler world whose name means "shining one" - than by citizens. Every river crossing and confluence is inhabited by a devata. Every tree is home to a devata, a

fact so certain that no local will cut a mature tree down for fear of the repercussions. At the village entrance and in every farmer's field, near the well, there is a guardian deva enshrined for protection. There are devatas in roadside shrines, devatas in caves, devatas living in the mountains and Vanadevatas inhabiting the forests and groves. Each caste has its guardian devas. The dhobis keep a shrine for Periathambiran near the village laundry pond. Carpenters depend on Tachakali to guide their hand. Every musician's instrument is the abode of a radiant being, every weaver's loom, every lorry driver's cluttered dashboard. No angels in Hinduism? Why, you can't step on a rock, enter a house or work in the garden without an awareness of them. Devas occupy every scripture, every temple, every sacred icon. They attend the dawn and hover at dusk. Like God Himself, they are everywhere, these sacred presences.

There is an important, but little defined, distinction between kinds of devas. Those described above are devatas, being thought to be mostly of a feminine form. The devas and mahadevas are of a higher order, occupying as it were a more distant space and yet frequently seen inwardly. They too, the Upanishads declare, are seeking freedom from samsara, desiring to know truth. Then there are the spirits of one's ancestors, of those who have passed on. Their existence is not merely a matter of belief, it is a duty, embedded in the shraddha rites, a requirement of all of good social conscience.

Of course, not every Hindu takes unseen beings seriously. There are many modern Indians who have been influenced by a more rational view, and who pooh-pooh the very notion of spirits. But they live mostly in big cities which, I suspect, devas themselves pooh-pooh. It is her 700,000 villages that have preserved India's intimacy with the unseen. Villagers were little affected by the scientific enterprise or the technological revolution. Life went on, simply and purely, and people never lost touch with the sacred universe.

Hindu scriptures says there are 33 million devas and provide us with abundant terms for the gods and spirits inhabiting the subtle planes. Some among these dwell together, in groups (gana), making up the retinues of Siva, Ganesha, Vayu and others. There are the maruts, associated with the wind-god and with Indra, and the eleven rudras who accompany Siva. There are the vasus, eight children of Ganga and the vidyadhar, the "holders of knowledge" who, residing between the earth and the sky, serve as benevolent helpers and guides for the living. There are the adityas, bhutas, yakshas, rakasasas, kimpurusas, gandharvas, asuras, apasaras and more.

In folk Hinduism the gramadevata or "village gods" are important. These are often called kshetrapala "protectors of the field or place." They watch the land, keeping intruders away, and they are often set up in the northeastern corner of the farm or village, facing east, with their all-seeing three eyes and their manifold arms displaying protective powers.

Many are females, worshipped widely for protection, often associated with the color blue, and said to be guardians of pools, lakes and plants. There is Annapurna, mother goddess of abundant harvests. There are angels that oversee marriage, fertility and health. Those that protect the home and the hamlet. Those that bring messages and warn of dangers. Those that run with animals and inspire music. There are devatas that harm and injure, communicate disease and wreak havoc. In short, every human activity has its spiritual, devonic dimension which lies beyond the merely human.

Vedic rites, called yajna, require four components, none of which may be omitted: dravya, or sacrificial substances; tyaga, the spirit of sacrificing all to God; devata, the celestial beings who receive the sacrifice and mantra, the empowering word or chant. Vedic seers saw differently than do scientists of today. When, for instance, they described fire, it was not merely the plasma process of carbonization of organic matter. It was far more. Agni, the name for fire, was also a deva, God's messenger and a conscious being, a presence beyond the material fact of fire. Anyone who has sat on a cold night, perhaps in some forest retreat, and drawn near a fire, watched its burning embers, felt its warm presence, has no doubt that fire is far more than a chemical reaction. The Vedic seers described some of that "far more," finding in it a consciousness, a friendliness, an expression of transcendent power and mystery. Thus did the Vedas speak of that which is hidden in material reality, not as a scientist, but as a mystic and poet would, with a deeper vision, a spiritual perception.

The importance of angels for the Hindu lies not so much in the devas themselves but in the underlying Divinity and potency of which they are merely a manifestation. In India or Sri Lanka, Grandma may return home from the temple, telling of how she could not find her way in the dark as she walked to the temple for early puja. Suddenly, there before her was a being. It was not really walking, more floating in front of her, guiding her along the dim dirt path. It was, she will tell, the deity of the temple, come to grace and guide her in the hour of need, and to make assurance of His loving presence in her life. It was God Himself. Of this she has no doubt.

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