



Buttermilk Sky

Cosmic beginnings can be as smooth as butter.

ACCORDING TO the *Mahabharata*, a 2,000-year-old Sanskrit epic, and other sacred Hindu texts, the Sun and Moon were, in another age, churned like butter out of the primordial ocean by the “gods” and “demons.” Ordinarily these supernatural rivals battled for ritual supremacy and celestial sovereignty, but they pooled their efforts to stir up the elixir of immortality from the ocean’s milky waters.

Before the gods and demons turned the ocean into buttermilk, the demons — older and stronger than the gods — had the upper hand in the ongoing conflict. Associated with darkness, the demons in Hindu tradition inhabited the infernal realm. The gods, on the other hand, are allied with light. But each is one side of the coin of complementary opposition, a tension believed to activate the forces that make the world what it is.

Weakened and discouraged from the battle with the demons, the gods consulted Vishnu the Preserver, one of the three supreme gods of Hinduism and the source of cosmic order. Vishnu prescribed a dose of *amrita*, the magical beverage of immortality, to restore each god’s lost vigor and explained the need to cooperate with the demons to obtain the elixir. Nothing less than a mountain could butter up

The Calendar of Good and Evil

Vasuki’s neck fans into five serpent heads gripped by Bali, the king of the demons, at the southern end of the wall illustrating the Churning of the Milky Ocean at Angkor Wat. Eleanor Mannikka interprets the entire 45 meters (150 feet) of this monumental relief as a calendrical stage in *Angkor Wat: Time, Space, and Kingship* (1996). Brahmanic astronomy, a philosophy of Hinduism, affiliated the demons with the south and the gods with the north. Equating all the demons with the days when the Sun is south of the celestial equator and all the gods with the days it is to the north, she counts all the figures twice for a total of 182 demons and 176 gods. Adding and doubling the small figure floating above Vishnu and Mount Mandara, she reaches a grand total of 360. To collect another five or six days, she assigns Vishnu and Mount Mandara three days for each equinox. According to Mannikka, the equinox in tradi-

tional Cambodia lasted three or four days. If these relationships are shown to be valid, the churning of Creation mimics the annual cycle of the Sun, which seasonally establishes the pattern of cosmic order.

ditional Cambodia lasted three or four days. If these relationships are shown to be valid, the churning of Creation mimics the annual cycle of the Sun, which seasonally establishes the pattern of cosmic order.



BUTTER MAKING In the ancient Hindu myth of the Churning of the Milky Ocean, essential components of the world emerge from the archaic waters. Inaugurated by the partnership of gods on the left and demons on the right, the oceanic reservoir turns into tangible treasures such as the Moon, the goddess of prosperity, and the intoxicating goddess of wine.

the ocean, and the gods would need the demons’ help to move Mount Mandara and twist it like a churn. Vasuki, the colossal Serpent King, wrapped his coils around Mandara and joined the dairy industry as the churn cord. Then, with the gods gripping the tail of the great snake and the demons alternately pulling on his neck, the mountain swiveled. This vigorous motion destabilized Mount Mandara, and it started to slip and sink. To avert a downturn in the churning business, Vishnu mutated into a tortoise, submerged himself between the mountain’s base and the ocean floor, and steadied the churn on his durable shell.

Gradually the ocean’s waters turned to milk, and mixed with the saps and juices flowing from the trees and herbs on Mandara’s slopes, the milk began to yield butter.

Buttermaking is an ancient technology. A milking-scene relief from the ancient city of Urkesh in Mesopotamia documents the process about 5,000 years ago. Extraction of the tiny drops of butterfat in milk begins with letting the milk stand to allow the cream to separate. Lighter than the milk, the cream containing the fat particles rises and is skimmed off the top. Transferred to the churn, the cream is



BARBARA SANBORN

agitated, usually with the twist of a rod. The turbulence induces collisions of fat globules, which stick to each other, and butter granules grow. When most of the butter has solidified, the remaining fluid — the buttermilk — is poured off. The butter is then molded, packaged, and distributed to consumers.

Encouraged by Vishnu, the gods and demons churned through every season, and finally wonders began to gel.

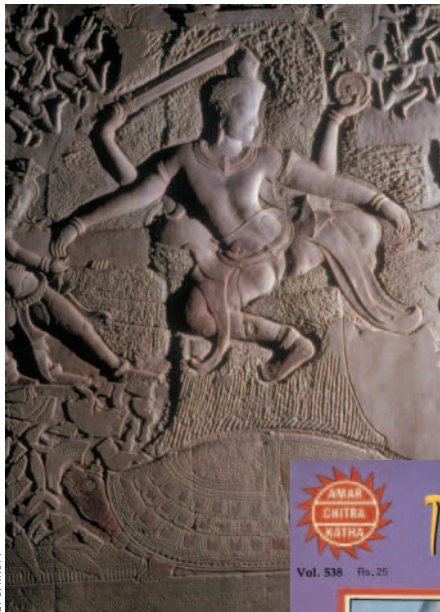
First the Moon rose from the waves, and the Sun soon followed. More treasures appeared until, eventually, a deadly poison also churned up. It would have enveloped the world and exterminated life had the god Shiva not drunk it and held it in his throat. As more remarkable items were stirred up, the gods moved onto the path of the Sun, the road to immortality, to wait for the elixir.

Solidified from the milky fluid, Dhanvantari, the physician of the gods, at last brought the amrita to the table, and the demons went wild. Delirious with the promise of immortality, they rushed the doctor and grabbed the fluid, each demanding his share. From the beginning, however, Vishnu had planned to churn the tables on the demons and dispense immortality only to the gods. Disguising himself with a little cheesecake, Vishnu took the shape of an attractive woman who milked her charms, causing the demons to lose their infatuation with immortality. Distracted by this coquette's baubles, bangles, and beads, they asked her to help them decide how to serve the elixir. She teased them with playful humor, and they put the amrita in her hands.

Both gods and demons, she reasoned, had worked equally to churn out the tonic, and so she seated them in separate rows and served the gods first. When she reached the end of their line, she disappeared. The furious demons cried foul and attacked the gods. The elixir, however, had energized the gods, and they quickly showed the demons that there was no point in crying over spilled milk.

The Sun and the Moon, however, noticed that the demon Rahu had masqueraded as a god. Flanked by the Sun and Moon, he sat in their line and managed to consume some elixir. As soon as Rahu tasted the potion, his deception was exposed and Vishnu decapitated him. Although he didn't have time to swallow it, the mouthful of the beverage made his head immortal. It rose into the sky with the Sun and Moon, but his mortal body fell dead on the ground. Still enraged, the head of Rahu continues to pursue the Sun and Moon through the sky, and eclipses are said to occur when he catches them in his teeth. In a partial eclipse, ritual noise from people below scares Rahu away, and his bite backs off. In a total eclipse, he devours the Sun or the Moon, but inevitably it drops from his severed throat unscathed.

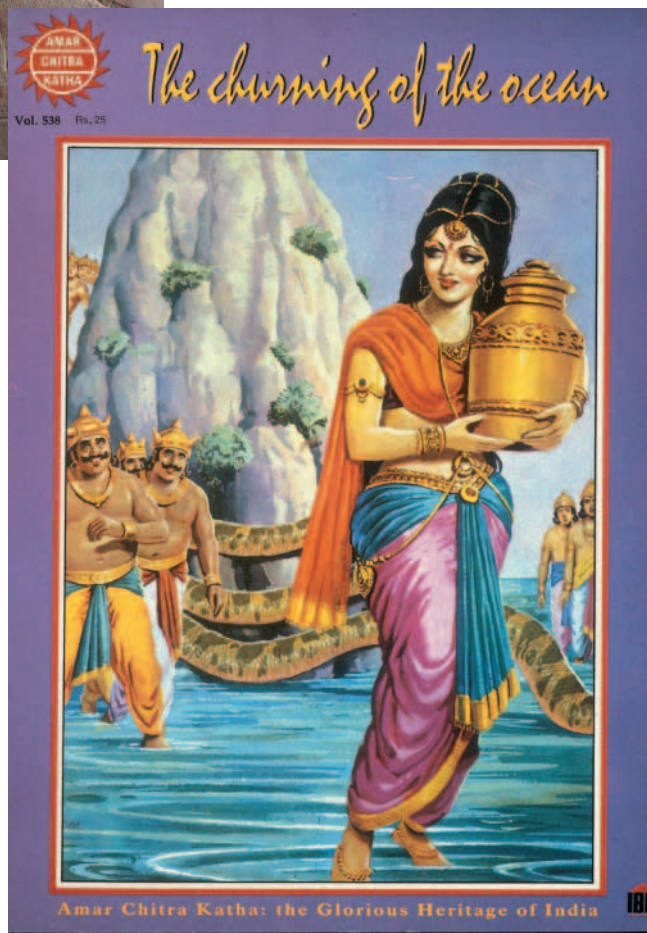
Buttermilk also sometimes shows up in the sky. The thick and rippling milky puffs of midlevel, altocumulus



E. C. KRUPP

VISHNU The wall of the second gallery of Angkor Wat, in Cambodia, illustrates the myth of the Churning of the Milky Ocean. This detail reveals the god Vishnu occupying a cylindrical Mount Mandara. Weakly supported arguments assert that this myth is linked to an archaic knowledge of precession. In fact, the story is about the divine establishment of cosmic order and the power of royal sovereignty.

CHARMED To prevent the demons from consuming the divine nectar of immortality, the god Vishnu commanded their attention in the guise of an enchanting woman. Convinced of her integrity, they turned the elixir over to her to distribute it.



THE CHURNING OF THE OCEAN, ANANT PAI, ED. (INDIAN BOOK HOUSE LIMITED, 1982)

clouds that often herald the approach of wetter weather are sometimes known as a buttermilk sky. Their distinctive curdled texture is usually produced by agitated convection when a cold front lifts a large mass of moist air. The clouds condense, like butter, out of the air and are sheared by wind.

In 1946, Hoagy Carmichael and Jack Brooks wrote a song about buttermilk clouds for the Western film *Canyon Passage*. In "Ole Buttermilk Sky" those churned-up clouds are told to hang the Moon up in the sky and let it stir up a little romance. The Moon ought to comply. One good churn deserves another. *

E. C. KRUPP is churning to be free at Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.