

[Oops: Unintended Consequences](#)

Category : [April 1997](#)

Published by Anonymous on Apr. 02, 1997

EDITORIAL

Oops: Unintended Consequences

How Hinduism's problems turned out to be opportunities, and other things that bite back

the Editor

Consider the human plight, made pitiful not by some merciless Omniscience but by meddling man himself. Trying to do one thing, he inadvertently invites the complex forces of karma to retaliate in sometimes vindictive and almost always unpredicted ways. Let's survey how man has scientifically improved things to the brink of disaster, wreaking havoc where help was his hope, drawing down nature's revenge.

Here in Hawaii a blatant example slithers around--the rapacious mongoose, brought to the islands by plantation owners to control rats who were devouring sugar cane crops. Not only was the rat nocturnal while the mongoose was diurnal (so they never met), but the mongoose morphed from savior to savager, killing chickens and driving rare birds to extinction's edge. Unintended consequences.

Behold the ominous green sea of kudzu taking over the

American Southeast and costing hundreds of millions to eradicate. The vine didn't come from Mars. Seventeen million seeds were intentionally introduced from Asia by government agriculturalists seeking to stop erosion and revitalize the soil. Its vigorous, astonishingly unmanagable growth habits were never considered, and it now destroys entire forests, engulfs buildings and pulls down telephone poles (really!). To kill it, special herbicides were developed, which, wouldn't you know, so effectively poison the soil that nothing can grow for a year. Erosion actually increases where it was planted! Unintended consequences.

Edward Tenner calls these "revenge effects" in his bestseller *Why Things Bite Back*. Tenner distinguishes such consequences from mere side effects in this way: "If a cancer chemotherapy treatment causes baldness, that is not a revenge effect, but if it induces another, equally lethal cancer, that is a revenge effect." His catalog of such events is mindboggling. He notes how home security systems installed by the hundreds of thousands diminished safety. Why? Because cheap systems became popular, and these flooded police stations with false alarms. In Philadelphia, a mere 3,000 of 157,000 calls over three years were real, diverting the equivalent of 58 full-time officers to answer them and promoting crime in these neighborhoods. Unintended consequences.

Hinduism has historically been more the foisted upon than the foister, and thus is a net beneficiary of revenge effects. Consider the British enterprise of indentured laborers, developed after slavery was outlawed and intended to fill the coffers of European businessmen. In a massive undertaking

between 1830 and 1850, the British shipped hundreds of thousands of East Indians to work their profitable plantations. It was not the intention of Anglican colonists to empower these laborers, but rather to exploit them. What ultimately came of their efforts would certainly stun planners. Most workers put down roots, had families and in time took over the islands. In Mauritius and Guyana today Hindus are a majority; in Fiji and Trinidad they are nearly so. Ironically and inadvertantly, the British handed over several small and beautiful countries to the Hindus. Unintended consequences.

English was introduced into India to create a class of clerks and subordinate functionaries to interpretate between rulers and the ruled. Instead, it became a major tool of nationalists who engineered the country's independence. It also opened the doors of modern professions to Hindus abroad and fueled a Hindu renaissance. Ditto the translations of Indian texts and scriptures, scribed by missionary scholars so they could better understand and expose the pagan texts as "containing precious little." In fact, these translations created new respect for Sanatana Dharma, attracting inquiring minds like Emerson and Thoreau. For the first time, Europe came to know the profundity of Indian philosophy, and, as Delhi's Ram Swarup notes, "Christianity began to be subverted from within, without a single missionary from India visiting Europe." Something similar happened with the monumental scholarship of Sir William Monier Williams, who labored for decades on A Sanskrit-English Dictionary to empower missionaries in translating the Bible and thus make Christian propaganda more effective. Far from serving that purpose, today his work draws thoughtful scholars into Hinduism through the language and strengthens the Hindu's self-understanding. Unintended consequences.

It's happening again today. Witness the massive diaspora of Sri Lanka's Tamil Hindu community. Ethnic fighting has driven 700,000 Hindus from their homeland, forcing them to find refuge around the globe [see story page 22]. But they are not languishing. Their innate ambition, love of education and commitment to community have brought Lanka's refugees more opportunity than oppression. They have become professionals, built temples and strengthened their situation in almost every case. Yes, they have suffered deeply. But they are now established, and their enhanced financial and intellectual resources are feeding back to families and causes in Sri Lanka. Trying to rein in the Tamil Hindus, the Singalese Buddhists have spread them like wildflower seeds across the planet where they (along with their spiritual and cultural heritage) are taking root and flourishing as never before.

One is reminded of a Guru Nanak story. Inhospitably received in a village, he bestowed a seeming blessing, saying, "May God keep you together always." Warmly welcomed in another, he uttered an apparent curse, "May God scatter you everywhere." Pressed to explain, he offered: "It is better that bad people stay in one place so their influence is limited; similarly, it is best that good people are dispersed so their influence becomes widespread."