

The Philosophy of *Bhakti* and the Significance of Hindu Image-worship (III)

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The Shri-Vaishnava tradition advances the view that the *arcā* form of God is the best form for us. The transcendent (*para*) form is like the supercosmic waters spoken of in Vaishnava cosmography, not accessible to us. The *vyuha* form is like the 'milky ocean', also inaccessible to us. The incarnations are like the downpour of rain-water not always available. The *antaryāmin* form is like the water in the womb of the earth. The *arcā* form is like the lakes, ponds, and wells that are accessible to us. As far as saving power is concerned, all forms are equal.⁵⁶ I leave out the considerable parallelism to the *trikāya* conception in Buddhism and the trinitarian view in Christianity. As a matter of fact, the *arcā* concept is unique to this view. The view further adds that to think of the consecrated image of the Divine in terms of its material composition is a heinous sin comparable to that of evaluating a *bhakta* on the ground of his birth and of the son questioning his mother's chastity.⁵⁷ It is also to be noted that the manner in which the images came into being and the persons and process responsible for the commencement of their worship do not bring about any gradation in their Divinity. The same divine presence operates in all the manifestations.

This account of the *arcā* implies that matter is not intrinsically and incurably undivine. It is a *vibhuti* (glory) of God and in that very fact lies its being and powers. To a godless vision it may appear merely

material. The pure matter through which Divinity does not shine at all is a creature of the materialistic illusion. Nature is packed with the Divine though its revelation is conditioned by the degree of opaqueness brought about by *rajas* and *tamas*. In the sublimest peak-phenomena of nature as the Vedic sages saw, there is a high measure of revelation. There is a 'Natural-supernaturalism' in this concept of nature. The tenth chapter of the *Gītā* is the classical declaration of this fundamental thought. As such, there is nothing crude or primitive in the worship of the glories of nature, such as the sun, the moon, and stars and other spiritually nourishing forces and phenomena of nature. There may be some of them in which the *sattva* aspect has reached the point of almost self-sublating transparency and in them the Divinity may stand in its unclouded radiance. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'The Ganges-water is not to be regarded as water; nor the dust of Sri Vrindavana as dust! nor the Mahaprasada of Sri Sri Jagannatha Deva as rice. These three are objective manifestations of the Supreme Being.'⁵⁸ A Vaishnava, perhaps, would add *shālagrāma* to the list, such as the one of Raghuvira that got itself invited to the home of Kshudiram, the godly father of Sri Ramakrishna.

It is necessary at this stage to have some idea of the sacred objects supposed, in the aforesaid manner, to be the *arcā* manifestations of the Divine. There are some non-representative symbols, the principal

ones of the category being the *shālagrāma* and *shivalinga*. The difference between them is that the former requires no ceremonial invocation of Vishnu into it. It is always and by nature Vishnu. All *shālagrāmas*, it may be mentioned, are symbols of Vishnu in His multitude of forms. The *shivalinga* requires an invocatory ceremony and ritualistic installation. It is the principal symbol of the Deity, Shiva. There are representative figures of Vishnu in several forms inclusive of the incarnations such as Trivikrama, Narasimha, Varāha, Rāma, Krishna, and Hayagriva. There are representative figures of all forms of the Divine Mother. Subsidiary deities such as Ganesha, Garuda, Skanda, and Hanumān, are also prevalent. The images may be of stone, or metal, or made of materials such as clay. There are also wooden images, though rarely. There may be merely drawings and paintings.

There are two categories of images. One is installed immovably, classed as *sthira* or *mula*. The other, invariably metallic, is *cala* or *utsava murti*. Shiva has representative forms such as Natarāja and Dakshināmurti. The *sthira* form of Shiva is always the *linga*. Such is not the case with Vishnu. The non-representative *shālagrāma* is usually worshipped in private residences and in temples. It is subsidiary to the images, though it is held to be the highest manifestation of Vishnu as *arcā*.

Geometrical patterns called *cakras* carrying sacred writing are also worshipped. In this connection we may mention that along with sacred occult geometrical figures, non-sense syllables called *bijāksharas*, conceived as powerful *mantras*, and occult gestures called *mudrās* are also used in worship. What they signify may lie perhaps in the direction of research opened up by the great psychologist, Jung. The representative figures of the deities reached in the medieval period of our history greatest heights of

artistic excellence. As we shall see later, a great deal of anthropomorphism has entered into this mode of worship. These images are largely anthropomorphic, but with marked differences. For instance, Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi have more than two arms, Shiva has three eyes, and some gods have animal heads. In the Puranas the non-anthropomorphic features receive symbolic interpretations. The representations strictly follow the account of the gods in the related scriptures. The peculiarities become decisive marks of identification to the devotees. The only God represented in a completely human shape is Rāma and this agrees with the strictly human character of the incarnation as depicted in Vālmiki's *Rāmāyana*. Highly philosophical imports are ascribed to certain features. For instance, Natarāja dances a cosmic dance with all its metaphysical implications and Vishnu invariably has a jewel adorning his chest, *Kaustubha*, and it is said to represent the individual self or Jiva treasured by the God in fond care.

So much may be enough as a very rough indication of the typical kinds of images worshipped by the Hindus. The field of data is very vast and only a meagre selection must content us.

Humanization of deity

There is one important point in the worship of images and we have to understand it. The process of worship in its major outline humanizes the Deity a great deal and service offered is of the kind that one would render to a venerated and loved human guest, of course, with infinitely greater veneration and love. The point of this humanization requires explanation. It is taken that God takes on human limitations, so that the worshipper may have the satisfaction of serving Him. In fact, He becomes utterly helpless and comes to depend upon man for all His needs

conceived on human lines. He becomes *arcaka-parādhina* (dependent upon the worshipper). Only then the worshipper can have the pleasure of completely ministering to His needs. Why this extreme humanization? There is an episode in the *Bhāgavata* which points to the line of explanation.⁶⁰ Mother Yashodā finds her son extremely naughty and she catches Him with great difficulty and ties Him up. Then Krishna sobs and weeps like any human child, hiding His divine greatness completely. This episode moves the devotees profoundly. Particularly, one Tamil saint, Nammālvār, seems to have fainted in an intoxication of love. The reason for the saint's feelings is something remarkable and subtle. If Shri Krishna did not submit to the punishment and did not show the contrite grief of a punished child, the mother would be deprived of the normal satisfaction that a mother would get in correcting her mischievous child. Shri Krishna did not want to deny his mother that pleasure and satisfaction by an untimely disclosure of his divine greatness. This self-concealment was an act of profound consideration and mercy. Nammālvār was moved by this compassionate self-limitation on the part of the Almighty.

A similar episode occurs in the life of Sri Ramakrishna.⁶¹ Rāmalālā, child Rāma, was playing with him in the form of an image of boy Rāma. Once Rāmalālā went too far in his pranks and Sri Ramakrishna punished him suitably. Rāmalālā is said to have suffered in consequence and wept. This moved Sri Ramakrishna. Such is the case in principle of extreme humanization of God—to the point of helplessness in the *arcā* form, so that the joy of looking after and serving Him may come to the devotee to the maximum measure. An *ācārya* (spiritual teacher) puts the thought with wonderful precision. *Shilād jadibhuyaseo*⁶² (Out of

Your compassionate condescension, O Lord, You become inert and helpless).

The technique of worship is wonderfully conceived in the traditions of all the movements of *bhakti* devoted to Shiva, Devi, and Vishnu in all their forms. The Hindu mind seems to be superbly logical and imaginatively rich in the planning of the science and art of image-worship. A brief idea of it may be given. The Vaishnava tradition may serve as an illustration and it has fundamental correspondence with all other traditions.

The devotee is asked to do self-purificatory rites to start with. In particular he has to imagine that he sanctifies himself in the sacred Ganga flowing from Trivikrama's foot. He has to perform all the Vedic rites such as *sandhyā* and with well-chosen and clean equipment he has to enter the shrine. He has to awaken the Lord with hymns to that effect, somewhat in the style in which sage Vishvāmītra arouses Shri Rāma in their journey from Ayodhya. Hundreds of highly devotional compositions in fine musical quality have come into existence in Sanskrit and vernaculars for this purpose. One may remember the poems of Āndāl and the *Suprabhātam* addressed to God Venkatesha of Tirumalai in this connection, which are perhaps the most moving in the kind. The worshipper has to meditate on the Lord deeply and invoke His gracious presence for receiving the humble worship. It has to be noted that the worship is three parts mental and is physical only in one part. The Lord is invited from His celestial abodes, such as Vaikuntha, from the seats of incarnations such as Ayodhya and Mathura-Vrindavana, holy places such as Badari and Shrirangam, and from one's own heart where He dwells as the *antaryāmin*. As He is supposed to present Himself in answer to the invocation, fitting preliminaries are gone through in act and

imagination. Then His *abhisheka* (bathing) is arranged. The waters are imagined to be from all the sacred *tirthas*, Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, and the four seas. The analogy of the grand coronation-bathing of Shri Rāma at the hands of the aged sage Vashishtha and of Krishna as Govinda by Indra is specifically suggested.

After bath He is to be dressed and decorated. Grandeur in conception, whatever be the actual facilities on hand, is the order throughout. The *jiva* is the *kaustubha*⁶³ on the chest of Vishnu but Vedānta Deshika prays to be taken up as an anklet and Nammālvār wants the glory of being the *pādukā* (shoe or slipper). Hence in the Shri-Vaishnava shrines the sacred replica of the *pādukā* of the Deity is called to this day by his name.

The Lord is then invited to the durbar, as it were, and is offered sensuous homage. Softly luminous lights are lit and waved before Him. The burning of camphor and waving of the light artistically before the image is a common practice. Incense is burnt and the image is anointed with scents and sandal paste. Soft and ceremoniously artistic fanning takes place. Music is performed and dance-offerings are part of temple worship. Sacred hymns from the most ancient Vedas, all the four of them, the Upanishads, the Itihāsas and Puranas, the Vedantic scriptures, and later devotional compositions in all languages are to be offered at this stage to the accompaniment of flowers and leaves such as *tulasi*.

The floral decoration is a grand affair in the Vaishnava worship. In fact, Vishnu is described as *ahankāra-priya*. The hymn-offering along with floral offering is called *pushpānjali* or *mantra-pushpa*. Many a great composer would present his composition of the day to his God at this stage of worship. It is also at this stage that the thousand names of the Deity, such as *Vishnu-sahasranāma*,

are gone through one by one with the obeisance-addition, to make complete sentences like *Aum vaishnave namah*, and each sentence is accompanied with the offering of *tulasi* or flowers to the Deity. The recapitulation of the essence of sacred learning and heart-felt outpourings in new hymns, in this attitude of devotion, imparts to the worship the quality of awakened adoration. Maybe it is this particular phase of worship that suggested to the great Udayana to name his theistic classic *Nyāya-Kusumāñjali*. It may also be that Udayana's title may have suggested the name *Gitānjali* to the poet of awakened India for his lyrical devotion.

Physical and ethical flowers

Let us note that worship so elaborate and rich may not be possible for the majority of worshippers, a fear that made the holy Kshudiram hesitate to accept the gracious self-sponsored coming of Raghuvira. In answer to this the *Gitā* proclaims that just a leaf, or a flower, or a little water would be enough, if offered with pure love.⁶⁴ Raghuvira duly assured Kshudiram to that effect. There is also a moral alternative to the physical flowers. The passages⁶⁵ run thus:

*Rāgādyapetam hridayam vāgadushtā-
nritadim;
Himsādirahitah kāyah keshavārāadhanam
trayam.*

*Ahimsā prathamam pushpam
pushpamindriyanigrahaḥ,
Sarvabhutadayā pushpam kshamā pushpam
visheshataḥ;*

*Jñānam pushpam tapah pushpam dhyānam
Pushpam tu saptamam, satyam ashtavidham
pushpam vishnoḥ pritikaram sadā.*

While the first verse makes purity of heart, speech, and deeds the threefold worship, the second enumerates eight

flowers, *ahimsā* (non-violence), self-control, compassion, forgiveness, knowledge, austerity, meditation and truthfulness as very pleasing to the Lord. The *Gītā*⁶⁶ has evolved the principle that would make all actions forms of worship, ‘*Svakarmanā tamabhyarcya siddhim vindati mānavah*’ (by worshipping Him with his proper duty, man attains perfection). Maybe the physical flowers and the ethical ones should go together to constitute the full course of worship. In fact, the final offering that crowns all is self-offering, *ātmanivedana*. We come to it shortly.

Then comes the offering of food. While the devotee makes the offering in all humility and full awareness of the poverty of what he could procure, he is heartened by the examples in incarnations such as Rāma and Krishna, in which the infinite master of creation relished the food offered by the poorest of the poor: Guhaka, Shabari, Vidura, and Kucela. There is a verse in *Krishna-karnāmrita* (III. 107) which appeals to the Lord on the strength of these precedents to accept his food, however unworthy it may be, in the same spirit of compassionate condescension. The Lord has shown that He can relish the gifts of the poor and He does not care for luxuries. True richness in His view is richness of love. The worship is concluded appropriately and finishing prayers are hymned. The devotee almost blesses the Lord that everything may go well and prosperously with Him. There is the completest overlooking of the majesty of God in such tender concern for His welfare. Such is this love’s paradoxical blindness. *Mangalashāsana* is the technical expression for this communication of good wishes to God.

Such is roughly the routine puja, common in essentials, in both private worship of household gods and public places of worship, the temples. Before we consider

the broad aspects of temple-worship, something more is to be said about private worship.

It may appear that in view of the humanization of the Deity in private worship and the fairly complete nature of the worshipper’s active service, and the further fact that the Deity is invoked for accepting the worship, He, the worshipped One, may be considered a guest, however loved and revered, and the owner of the dwelling is the master of the situation and that he chooses to shower consideration on the invited Divinity.

The truth is that the dwelling belongs to God, the articles of worship belong to Him inalienably, and that He favours the devotee by utilizing him in an instrumental capacity to offer Him what belongs to Him in His own residence for His own gratification. In fact, as Vedānta Deshika says, the worshipper also is in the status of an article of worship: ‘*Arādhā kasyāpi arcanāngavastutvam avishishtam*.’⁶⁷ So the entire process of *pujā* (worship) is arranged by the Lord and He is graciously pleased to associate the worshipper in it so that he may be blessed. Ultimately it is the worshipper that is in the position of the recipient and his God is the Giver. This should be the understanding on the part of the worshipper. In his *Nitya-grantha*, Rāmānuja puts this realization at the beginning of the worship and at its conclusion also.⁶⁸ The substance is that God resolves to take worship from the worshipper and accomplishes the task as resolved. The ego of the worshipper is nowhere in the picture. He is just exalted by being used.

It is the ‘I’, the ego in man, that creates a seemingly impassable distance between him and his God and renders communion by way of worship an impossibility. With its annihilation that consummation becomes an actuality. In the words of Tagore we are to

say: When this home of mine is made thine that very moment is it (the soul of mine) taken across. . . . Where can I meet thee unless in this my home made thine?'⁶⁹

Temple-worship

It is difficult to be sure as to how ancient in Hinduism is the institution of worship in temples. An extensive reference to temples is found in the *Bhāgavata*. Many other Puranas are fuller on the matter. The *Rāmāyana* of Vālmiki (3.12.11-21) refers to the shrines of various gods in the hermitage of Agastya. They must mean places of worship other than the location of the Vedic sacrificial fire. In the *Chāndogya Upanishad* we get reference to the city and the palace of Brahman. The terms signify in the context the human body and the human heart.⁷⁰ Such a figurative usage implies the prior existence of the concepts in grosser application. The Āgama literature, Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shākta, promulgates such image-worship and lays down all the details. It seems to be presupposed by the *Mahābhārata* as we have the epic now and the latter contains a condensed version of the Pancarātra Āgama.

Whatever the antiquity, temples have come to form part and parcel of the religious tradition of Hinduism. It is curious that even the manifestly God-denying religions have adopted the institution of worship in temples. There is the hypothesis that Hinduism borrowed image-worship in temples from alien sources. The investigation of this historical question falls outside the scope of our present study. It is enough if we note that historical Hinduism includes public worship in temples.

Temples are centres of worship by the entire community. Their creation, maintenance, and improvement involve the entire society of the locality. Temple-worship is organized on an extensive scale. It is no simple affair. Even the simplest

temple requires religiously trained priests, donations for its prosperity, militant protectors, labourers, and artisans for its upkeep and expansion. There can be no single-caste temple. The worship round the day, week, fortnight, the different seasons, and the whole year calls for collective planning and execution. Even when temples are created by kings and rich men as a measure of 'conspicuous consumption', a supporting community with some modification of details is necessary. This involvement of the whole community is a vital factor in temple-worship.

Temples may have originated as simple and austere buildings. But in the course of historical evolution they have grown into huge structures. Some of them have grown so big that instead of their being parts of towns, towns have come to form parts of temple—Shrirangam, for example. The dimension is not the only point of significance. Almost all the visual arts are enlisted in the construction. The most enduring and qualitatively highest architecture of India is that of temples with a rich variety of schools and styles. What is called functional architecture is no comparison to this religious architecture, and most monuments of the secular type have perished. Enormously rich growth of sculpture has marked the evolution of temples. The principal images of worship, decorative sculpture, and sculptural narration of religious stories and episodes exuberantly adorn the temples. Apart from the connected engineering competence, the art displayed in our temples is marvellous in quality, quantity, and range of variations. The principal icons installed for worship command spontaneous adoration by virtue of their exalted beauty. It is a mercy that enough of this exquisite beauty survives the brutal vandalism of the intervening times to give us an idea of the rich creation. It is to

be noted that though the dominating principle of temple-arts is religious or spiritual, secular themes enter into them in their macrocosmic representativeness. Not much painting has survived the ravages of history and weather, but what remains goes well in quality with the other arts.

These arts originally derived inspiration from religion but, in their turn, have substantially augmented that inspiration. The cause-and-effect relation has been really reciprocal. The idea behind such massive beautification of the places of worship is simple. They are conceived as the palaces of the King of the Universe and as such they must be made worthy of the Divine occupant. Further, all beauty is of and from Him and that idea should be conveyed in visible form as far as it is possible for the creativity of mortals. In addition to these arts, gardening also formed an essential accessory to temples for furnishing the flowers for worship. Some saints are satisfied with this service, though it is a distant form of association with the sanctum sanctorum.

Some saints have devoted themselves to digging and maintaining tanks and ponds for supplying water to temples and the temple gardens and have delighted themselves in this still remoter form of service.

Music and dance

We have already mentioned that music and dance form part of the devotional offering in the course of worship. The finest musicians and composers have offered their best to the shrines of their choice. The gods inspire the music and that, in its turn, gets dedicated to the Divine. No wonder that the highest forms of Indian music and song are outpourings of God-intoxicated souls. Secular music at its best is but a pale approximation to this unapproachable height. Devotional dancing is part of temple-worship and gifted dancers with appropriate training formed a permanent part of the temple-staff. That the best in art is to be dedicated to the Supreme and that this sublimated product of the artistic genius should entrance the public and turn it madly Godward are the twin designs in the context. That it should degenerate and give rise to forms of social pathology is a reflection on the baser possibilities in human nature and does not reduce the grandeur of the original conception. God Himself is the primordial musician and dancer in the Hindu conception of the Deity. His joyous self-revelation in beauty is the secret of creation. ■

(To be continued)

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