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Chapter Author(s): DIANA L. ECK

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The Image of God

DIANA L. ECK

The vivid variety of Hindu deities is visible everywhere in India. Rural India is filled with countless wayside shrines. In every town of some size there are many temples, and every major temple will contain its own panoply of shrines and images. One can see the silver mask of the goddess Durgā or the stone shaft of the Śiva *linga* or the four-armed form of the god Viṣṇu. Over the doorway of a temple or a home sits the plump, orange elephant-headed Gaṇeśa or the benign and auspicious Lakṣmī. Moreover, it is not only in temples and homes that one sees the images of the deities (see figure 4). Small icons are mounted at the front of taxis and buses. They decorate the walls of tea stalls, sweet shops, tailors, and movie theaters. They are painted on public buildings and homes by local folk artists. They are carried through the streets in great festival processions.

It is visibly apparent to anyone who visits India or who sees something of India through the medium of film that this is a culture in which the mythic imagination has been very generative. The images and myths of the Hindu imagination constitute a basic cultural vocabulary and a common idiom of discourse. Since India has “written” prolifically in its images, learning to read its mythology and iconography is a primary task for the student of Hinduism. In learning about Hinduism, it might be argued that perhaps it makes more sense to begin with Gaṇeśa, the

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FIGURE 4
“One Soul, Two Bodies.” Poster illustration by Yogendra Rastogi,
purchased in Brindavan, August 2005.

elephant-headed god who sits at the thresholds of space and time and who blesses all beginnings, and then proceed through the deities of the Hindu pantheon, rather than to begin with the Indus Valley civilization and proceed through the ages of Hindu history. Certainly for a student who wishes to visit India, the development of a basic iconographic vocabulary is essential, for deities such as the monkey Hanumān or the fierce Kālī confront one at every turn.

When the first European traders and travelers visited India, they were astonished at the multitude of images of the various deities they saw there. They called them “idols” and described them with combined fascination and repugnance. For example, Ralph Fitch, who traveled as a merchant through North India in the 1500s writes of the images of deities in Banāras: “Their chiefe idols bee blacke and evill favoured, their mouths monstrous, their eares gilded and full of jewels, their teeth and eyes of gold, silver and glasse, some having one thing in their hands and some another.”¹

Fitch had no interpretive categories, save those of a very general Western Christian background, with which to make sense of what he saw. Three hundred years did little to aid interpretation. When M. A. Sherring lived in Banāras in the mid-1800s he could still write, after studying the city for a long time, of “the worship of uncouth idols, of monsters, of the linga and other indecent figures, and of a multitude of grotesque, ill-shapen, and hideous objects.”² When Mark Twain traveled through India in the last decade of the nineteenth century, he brought a certain imaginative humor to the array of “idols” in Banāras, but he remained without what Rudolf Arnheim would call “manageable models” for placing the visible data of India in a recognizable context. Of the “idols” he wrote, “And what a swarm of them there is! The town is a vast museum of idols—and all of them crude, misshapen, and ugly. They flock through one’s dreams at night, a wild mob of nightmares.”³

Without some interpretation, some visual hermeneutic, icons and images can be alienating rather than enlightening. Instead of being keys to understanding, they can kindle xenophobia and pose barriers to understanding by appearing as a “wild mob of nightmares,” utterly foreign to and unassimilable by our minds. To understand India, we need to raise our eyes from the book to the image, but we also need some means of interpreting and comprehending the images we see.

The bafflement of many who first behold the array of Hindu images springs from the deep-rooted Western antagonism to imaging the divine at all. The Hebraic hostility to “graven images” expressed in the Commandments is echoed repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible: “You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

Worshipping as God those “things” that are not God has been despised in the Western traditions as “idolatry,” a mere bowing down to “sticks and stones.” The

difficulty with such a view of idolatry, however, is that anyone who bows down to such things clearly does not understand them to be sticks and stones. No people would identify themselves as “idolaters,” by faith. Thus idolatry can be only an outsider’s term for the symbols and visual images of some other culture. Theodore Roszak, writing in *Where the Wasteland Ends*, locates the “sin of idolatry” precisely where it belongs: in the eye of the beholder.⁷

In beginning to understand the consciousness of the Hindu worshipper who bows to “sticks and stones,” an anecdote of the Indian novelist U. R. Anantha Murthy is provocative. He tells of an artist friend who was studying folk art in rural North India. Looking into one hut, he saw a stone daubed with red *kunkum* powder, and he asked the villager if he might bring the stone outside to photograph it. The villager agreed, and after the artist had photographed the stone he realized that he might have polluted this sacred object by moving it outside. Horrified, he apologized to the villager, who replied, “It doesn’t matter. I will have to bring another stone and anoint *kunkum* on it.” Anantha Murthy comments, “Any piece of stone on which he put *kunkum* became God for the peasant. What mattered was his faith, not the stone.”⁸ We might add that, of course, the stone matters too. If it did not, the peasant would not bother with a stone at all.

Unlike the zealous Protestant missionaries of a century ago, we are not much given to the use of the term “idolatry” to condemn what “other people” do. Yet those who misunderstood have still left us with the task of understanding, and they have raised an important and subtle issue in the comparative study of religion: What is the nature of the divine image? Is it considered to be intrinsically sacred? Is it a symbol of the sacred? A mediator of the sacred? How are images made, consecrated, and used, and what does this tell us about the way they are understood? But still another question remains to be addressed before we take up these topics. That is the question of the multitude of images. Why are there so many gods?

THE POLYTHEISTIC IMAGINATION

It is not only the image-making capacity of the Hindu imagination that confronts the Western student of Hinduism, but the bold Hindu polytheistic consciousness. Here too, in attempting to understand another culture, we discover one of the great myths of our own: the myth of monotheism. Myths are those “stories” we presuppose about the nature of the world and its structures of meaning. Usually we take our own myths so much for granted that it is striking to recognize them as “myths” that have shaped not only our religious viewpoint, but our ways of knowing. Even

Westerners who consider themselves to be secular participate in the myth of monotheism: that in matters of ultimate importance, there is only One—one God, one Book, one Son, one Church, one Seal of the Prophets, one Nation under God. The psychologist James Hillman speaks of a “monotheism of consciousness” that has shaped our very habits of thinking, so that the autonomous, univocal, and independent personality is considered healthy; single-minded decision-making is considered a strength; and the concept of the independent ego as “number one” is considered normal.⁹

In entering into the Hindu world, one confronts a way of thinking that one might call “radically polytheistic,” and if there is any “great divide” between the traditions of India and those of the West, it is in just this fact. Some may object that India has also affirmed Oneness as resolutely and profoundly as any culture on earth, and indeed it has. The point here, however, is that India’s affirmation of Oneness is made in a context that affirms with equal vehemence the multitude of ways in which human beings have seen that Oneness and expressed their vision. Indian monotheism or monism cannot, therefore, be aptly compared with the monotheism of the West. The statement that “God is One” does not mean the same thing in India and the West.

At virtually every level of life and thought, India is polycentric and pluralistic. India, with what E. M. Forster called “her hundred mouths,”¹⁰ has been the very exemplar of cultural multiplicity. There is geographical and racial diversity from the Pathans of the Punjab to the Dravidians of Tamilnād. There are fourteen major language groups. There is the elaborate social diversity of the caste system. There is the religious diversity of major religious traditions: the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, and Parsis. (As Mark Twain quipped in his diaries from India, “In religion, all other countries are paupers. India is the only millionaire.”)¹¹ And even within what is loosely called “Hinduism” there are many sectarian strands: Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, Śāktas, Smārtas, and others. Note that the very term Hinduism refers only to the “ism” of the land that early Muslims called “Hind,” literally, the land beyond the Indus. Hinduism is no more, no less than the “ism” of India.

The diversity of India has been so great that it has sometimes been difficult for Westerners to recognize in India any underlying unity. As the British civil servant John Strachey put it, speaking to an audience at Cambridge University in 1859, “There is no such country, and this is the first and most essential fact about India that can be learned.”¹² Seeking recognizable signs of unity—common language, unifying religion, shared historical tradition—he did not see them in India.

In part, the unity of India, which Strachey and many others like him could not see, is in its cultural genius for embracing diversity, so that diversity unites, rather than divides. For example, there are the six philosophical traditions recognized as “orthodox.” But they are not called “systems” in the sense in which we use that term. Rather, they are *darśanas*. Here the term means not the “seeing” of the deity, but the “seeing” of truth. There are many such *darśanas*, many “points of view” or “perspectives” on the truth. And although each has its own starting point, its own theory of causation, its own accepted enumeration of the means by which one can arrive at valid knowledge, these “ways of seeing” share a common goal—liberation—and they share the understanding that all their rivals are also “orthodox.” Philosophical discourse, therefore, takes the form of an ongoing dialogue, in which the views of others are explained so that one can counter them with one’s own view. Any “point of view” implicitly assumes that another point of view is possible.

Moving from the philosophical to the social sphere, there is the well-known diversity of interlocking and interdependent caste groups. On a smaller scale, there is the polycentric system of family authority; which is integral to the extended, joint family. Here not only the father and mother, but grandparents, aunts, and uncles serve as different loci of family authority and fulfill different needs.

Not unrelated to this complex polycentrism of the social structure is the polycentric imaging of the pantheon of gods and goddesses. Just as the social and institutional structures of the West have tended historically to mirror the patriarchal monotheism of the religious imagination, so have the social structure and family structure of India displayed the same tendency toward diversification that is visible in the complex polytheistic imagination. At times, the ordering of the diverse parts of the whole seems best described as hierarchical;¹³ yet it is also true that the parts of the whole are knotted together in interrelations that seem more like a web than a ladder. The unity of India, both socially and religiously, is that of a complex whole. In a complex whole, the presupposition upon which oneness is based is not unity or sameness, but interrelatedness and diversity.

The German Indologist Betty Heimann uses the image of a crystal to describe this multiplex whole:

Whatever Man sees, has seen or will see, is just one facet only of a crystal. Each of these facets from its due angle provides a correct viewpoint, but none of them alone gives a true all-comprehensive picture. Each serves in its proper place to grasp the Whole, and all of them combined come nearer to its full grasp. How-

ever, even the sum of them all does not exhaust all hidden possibilities of approach.