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Theology as History Divine Images, Imagination, and Rituals in India

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There is in India a widespread theological view according to which the limitations of human beings make it necessary for them to practise image worship in order to approach the divine. Such an assertion, however, is not confined to theology. It often pretends to “explain” actual practices in relation to society, and has spilled over into both art history and that part of general historiography that seeks to reconstruct the early developments of image worship on the subcontinent. Ethnographic evidence, on the contrary, suggests that observable practices provide a markedly different picture from the one that could be expected to follow from the “theological view” when it is applied to society. Moreover, today’s observations impose on any theory of the past a set of empirical constraints that it should have to meet. I will thus argue in favour of a thorough reconsideration of some frequently made assumptions about the sociology and the early history of image worship, suggesting eventually a few perspectives that could orient further research and discussion.

Kali Yuga

Over the years, I have had many discussions with K.P.C. Anujan Bhattattiripad, a Kerala expert in temple and image consecration (a *tantri*), editor, and commentator of the main āgamic text followed in /p.57/ the region, the *Tantrasamuccaya*. During our exchanges, I was regularly told by him that sages (*muni*) can realize divinity in themselves without external support. Twice-borns have to do it through the fire cult. Only inferior beings need to rely on “idols” (his word). This was thus not only a theological statement but a “sociological” one as well. It was combined with a historical perspective: in olden days, fire was the only agent used in the worship, “but later people could no more understand.” Hence, the “preceptors” of that time “devised a more visual method”: this is why temples and images were created.

Relying on a Kerala devotional text of the sixteenth century, the *Nārāyaṇīyam*, he explained, for instance (abstract of a discussion we had on 7 April 1994):

At the time of the first perfect age (*kṛtayuga*), worship was only in the mind. Lord Viṣṇu was imagined with two arms, white coloured, with long hair, seated, in ascetic position – this was correlated to the state of purity of our ancestors.

In the following age (*trētāyuga*), worship was through the fire sacrifice. God was thought of as a person himself doing such sacrifices, with two hands holding sacrificial implements, slightly reddish in colour, in a state of desire and emotions – linked to our ancestors’ quality of heart.

In the *Dvāpara* age, Viṣṇu was four-handed, holding discus, conch, mace and a thousand-petal lotus. The presence of weapons was due to the fact that, at that time, man's mind was affected by evil thoughts: men needed to be protected from enemies. This is the time when temple and idol worship started, the time of distinguishing between the various gods and goddesses. For, previously, there were no separate deities. Thus [he concluded] "idol-worship is very recent in India."

During another discussion (in 1997), he insisted again on the contrasts opposing sages, twice-borns, and "those without intelligence,"¹ the latter being the only ones to use divine images (*pratimā*).

Such assertions are definitely not isolated in contemporary India. During my first years of fieldwork in Kerala, in the early 1980s, I was repeatedly told by educated people that "idols" are in fact only symbols. Nobody should worship the image as such, but only the God behind it. God is formless. But the human mind, unable to imagine such an abstract reality, needs a material support for mental concentration. According to my interlocutors, therefore, divine images, especially anthropomorphic ones, were to be understood as a kind of pedagogic **/p.58/** device. Their ultimate purpose was to lead today's low-standard devotees (especially in this present *Kaliyuga*) to the understanding that God was beyond form and characterization. If imagination had to be at work, it was for imagining that what you saw was *not* God. Idols were there in order that the mind may see beyond them.²

This is not without textual background. The *Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha*, for instance, insists that worshipping images is for those with an "underdeveloped intellect" and a "childlike mind."³ That this belief was put into practice is also attested: in an episode in Rāmakṛṣṇa's life, the saint receives a statue of Rāma from an ascetic who does not need it anymore for realizing God.⁴ And even if such a perspective does not end in discarding idols, it certainly adds, at least for some devotees, to the complexity with which the idol is regarded, making for an extremely rich mental process bridging the distance between effective physical manipulations (gestures made on, or in front of, the image) and what happens "really" to the deity at an invisible level.⁵

But this might not be the end of the tale. As suggested at the beginning of this chapter this *theological* position, whatever its elaboration in texts and its real impact on practice, is not confined to the justification of image worship. It seems also to lie behind some developments in art history and in the historiography of early image worship in India, this time at the purely *academic* level, and this is the point that I want to address.

In the case of art history, at least, theology has clearly influenced academic practice since the end of nineteenth century. Let me quote a few examples. According to historian Ravi Varma, there is no real "image" worship in India: "The Hindu who does not conceive a form for God cannot have any idol of God; to him a *vigraha* is not the 'image' of God, but a 'symbolic representation' of the nameless, formless, qualityless Absolute, on whom qualities are superimposed ... to suit the natural qualities and leanings of the *sādhaka* (worshipper), in order to enable him to conceive and meditate upon the Absolute."⁶

The art historian B.C. Bhattacharya concurs, and suggests moreover that the religious iconography found in India is visually of the meditative kind – another obviously counterfactual statement: "From all directions, the Hindus have tried to render a meditative

prayer to God ... To add to their attention – being at the very heart of prayer – they have tried to have such images made as would appeal to their religious sentiments and sympathies and would evoke various emotions to enable them to perform the sacred journey towards the /p.59/ supreme being. In most cases the images have been represented in a meditative posture.”⁷

Positions like these are not the product of an “India” versus “the West” pseudo-divide. Some Western scholars writing on India have been of a similar opinion. For Alain Daniélou, for instance, “the image of a god is thus a form used for the concentration of the mind on an abstraction.”⁸ And the art historian B. Rowland writes: “There is nothing corresponding to idolatry in the narrow sense, since the worship is never paid to the image of stone or brass, but to what the image stands for, the prototype. The image, in other words, as a reflection of the godhead, is as the diagram of the geometrician in relation to the great diagram in the beyond.”⁹ Even a scholar like T.A. Gopinatha Rao, author of a treatise on Indian iconography that is still a standard reference book today, establishes a link between the form of divine images and spiritual progress: “His [the devotee’s] God may or may not be conceived as anthropomorphic; the form of the conception depends upon the stage of advancement of the worshipper in the culture of divine knowledge and spiritual wisdom.”¹⁰

Indeed, Indian experts writing in the early twentieth century and their later Western counterparts had deep and well-founded motives for adopting what may be termed an idealistic stand: they strongly felt the necessity to refute accusations of “idolatry” (in the pejorative sense of the word) or of “monstrosity” that were so often, and for such a long period, attached to divine representations in India, at first in the gaze of Muslim sensibility, then during the colonial period.¹¹ For reaching such a goal, claiming that divine images are not images but symbols was a main discursive strategy. It could also be done in a subtler way. In a recent article,¹² Parul Dave Mukherji has shown how the well known art historian A.K. Coomaraswamy aimed at revalorizing Indian art and aesthetics by denying any “naturalism” in it, and by claiming for Indian art a transcendental nature. Although there were voices of dissent against Coomaraswamy’s argument at the time (for instance, the Sanskritist V. Raghavan), this was to become for a long time a canonical framework for interpretations in Indian aesthetics. I would suggest that such a stand, at the academic level of art history (but not for all art historians, many of them being currently engaged in a critical reconsideration of this attitude), relies heavily on the kind of theology about image worship that we met previously. And this idealistic approach to art might have contributed, in turn, to reinforcing this pre-existing theology, now accepted knowledge among the educated elite in India.

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Let us turn now to the main topic of this chapter, which bears on the historical reconstruction of the initial developments of temple and image worship. Here, too, we seem often to meet a historicized version of the theological argument. It runs more or less as follows, in two variants. According to one, the generalization of image worship comes from pre-existing popular cults, assimilated and integrated later on into a Brahminic world, which came thus to recognize progressively a new pantheon and to adhere partly to new, popular practices. According to another view, at a certain stage, due to the foresight of “thinkers,” Vedic abstract figures came to be put into stone for the sake of a wider, more popular audience.

Max Müller asserted, for instance, that “the worship of idols in India is a secondary formation, a later degeneration of the more primitive worship of ideal gods.”¹³ With a less idealistic stand, but along the same general line of historical argumentation, G.D. Sontheimer suggested that “probably the performance of Vedic sacrifices had become too complex and expensive and were eventually symbolic offerings. *Devapūjā*, the worship of deities, the creation of temples, became more favoured by the Brāhman.”¹⁴ The same author, in a later study, classified image worship as “folk religion,” conceding that “in practice the Brāhman would nevertheless often participate in folk religion.”¹⁵ A partisan of the theory of the foresight of ancient thinkers, Gopinatha Rao asserts, for his part, that “the images of the Hindu gods and goddesses are representations of divine attributes. It is plain that the thought of thinkers is made manifest and concretised by various means, such as speech, pictorial and sculptural representations, and signs, and symbols. All these means have been utilised in the history of humanity for bringing divinity down to the level of the common man and lifting him up gradually to the sublime height of true divine realisation. This is indeed what the seers of India have done.”¹⁶

Whatever the differences between these positions, they all tend to present image and temple worship as “popular” developments conceded (or brought) to the masses by an enlightened elite, a process either seen as a “degradation” of purer cults or as an uplift of the masses. This, of course, cannot but remind us of the theological affirmation that “weak-minded” people cannot do without idols. It recalls, too, an explanatory model commonly held about image worship in early Christianity and early Buddhism, according to which the beginnings of religious iconography originated as a result of an interaction between two broad strata in society, the “elite” and the “vulgar,” and developed more specifically in response to the needs of “the vulgar.” This position has been convincingly criticized, first by Peter Brown for Christianity, then by Gregory Schopen for Indian Buddhism, and will be presented with more details in the last part of this chapter.¹⁷ Suffice it to say for now that both authors showed that such beginnings did not result (as the model would have seen it) from an evolution resulting from “concessions” to popular needs, but as a consequence of profound social and mental changes within the religious elite itself.

The purpose of the present discussion is to explore a similar possibility in the case of early Hindu iconography. For this, it is necessary to have a look at what so-called “weak-minded” human beings effectively do in this *Kaliyuga*.

Invisibility, Divine Presences, and Ritual

We may first notice that even for those who affirm that idols are symbols meant to help humans in their spiritual quest, things are not always so clear. Gopinatha Rao, for one, whom we have seen summing up Hindu religious iconography as a means of progressing towards the true realization of the (formless) divine, can speak at the same time about the *sālagrāma* (the ammonite fossil figuring Viṣṇu’s discus) in these terms:

- It is considered a representation of the discus.
- It is “a representative” of the God.

- Some *śālagrāmas* are said to be “very efficacious,” granting “all the desires of the worshipper,” but defective ones bring “only misery.”¹⁸

In such a statement, the symbolic nature of images seems well forgotten, and the “experience” of the divine, which is said to be the purpose of religious iconography, has to be taken quite literally! As a matter of fact, the belief in the effective presence of deities in their representations is so widely and diversely attested throughout India that there is no point in multiplying examples: nearly all the ritual procedures and the interactions between idol and devotees are based on such an assumption. True, this is a focus of long-standing and intense debate among religious specialists and thinkers (as other chapters in this book underline). For the immense majority of devotees, however, God is altogether (made) present in his images, a **/p.62/** fact that generates a tension between what can be represented and what cannot,¹⁹ and relies on a voluntarily blurred distinction between the object and the deity²⁰ and the simultaneous presence and absence of the invisible within the tangible.²¹

What needs to be pointed out, as far as India is concerned, is that such a tension has a relevance that extends much further than the particular case of statues of gods and goddesses, the latter constituting, as a matter of fact, a small minority of the tangible supports used for manifesting the divine. This fundamental point will be illustrated through some ethnography. My argument here will be that anthropomorphic figurations of deities do not characterize in any way observable “popular” cults; in fact, it appears that quite the opposite is the case.

If an ethnographer had to rely on books on Indian iconography when studying cults, he would be in for some surprise. Not that such books are not good: indeed, many are excellent. But most of them, by vocation, will limit themselves to “interesting” iconography, that is, to statues, bas-reliefs, or paintings. Fieldwork provides a radically different picture. In the very first festival I witnessed in Kerala, in 1981, it took me some time to understand that the stool, the coconut placed on it, and the sword on its side, around which many temple servants were proceeding to offer worship, were the tangible outdoor figuration of the main deity of the place, goddess Bhadrakālī. I was to learn that, far from being exceptional, similar ritual objects for manifesting the divine were the rule.

Here are a few examples. In a festival observed in 1981 and 1982 in Tiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum), the capital city of Kerala, goddess Bhagavati was represented by two figurations. One was an assemblage consisting of a ritual pot filled with paddy, in which was inserted a cloth bearing the image of the goddess and a metal mirror, all being tightly fixed by a rope to a wooden stool; an iron sword rested against the assemblage. It was installed in a temporary shrine built for the celebrations. The other figuration, in the same shrine, was a wooden painted statue of the goddess with four arms, placed in front of the assemblage and masking it. Devotees faced the statue, but it was the assemblage that was said to be the real support of the goddess’s power, which had been ritually infused in it (in fact, many of the elements involved in this assemblage may be separately infused with divine presence in other contexts: the stool, as a throne on which the god or the goddess is invited; the metal mirror or the sword, as a **/p.63/** material “body”). At the end of the ceremonies, the assemblage was also at the centre of a specific ritual outside the shrine, this time without the metal mirror: it figured then the fierce form of Bhagavati, Bhadrakālī. A substitute of blood

sacrifice was offered to this Bhadrakālī and to her army. This army, composed of a multitude of subordinate violent deities and ghosts, was made present by empty palm shrines with bits of banana leaves for placing offerings and by a diagram of 4 x 4 squares made from the stem of a banana tree, in which offerings were also put: in a way, the offerings themselves were the most conspicuous sign of the deities' presence. A few particularly dangerous ghosts did not get any specific place, even temporarily. They were said to be hovering invisibly all around the area, and were placated by bits of offerings thrown up in the air (they were also expected to wander for a few days more on the scene and to "eat" the remains). True, during the festival the devotional attention of people (mostly Nāyar-s, a local high-ranking caste) was directed towards the wooden "anthropomorphic" statue of Bhagavati, and subsidiary cults to other deities did not evince much interest. But there did not seem to be any difficulty in imagining and giving offerings to a host of presences that remained invisible.²²

The fact that there is a statue inside the sanctum does not therefore necessarily entail that this statue will be the main recipient of divine power, or that it will be the only way to represent the main deity: many non-anthropomorphic supports might be used as well for that purpose. In addition, subsidiary deities may not get a statue, and many get only a very elementary support, if any at all. These cases are not "strange," isolated cases. They appear to be the rule.

As another example illustrating typical ways of marking divine presences in mid-sized Kerala temples, let us look at a temple in central Travancore whose patrons are high caste Nampūtiri Brahmins and Nāyar-s. Bhagavati, the main deity, is figured by a stone "anthropomorphic" statue installed in the sanctum. Her violent form, Bhadrakālī, is present in a sword, in a metal belt with sleigh bells, and in a pair of bronze anklets. She is incorporated at times by an institutional medium wearing these consecrated objects. She is also asked to reside in temporary colour *maṇḍalas* at festival times. Subsidiary deities and divinized ancestors of this local pantheon are figured by simple pebbles; one god is figured by an iron trident. All are placed outside the shrine proper but within the temple compound. At a distance from the temple, in the middle of paddy fields, a "cock- /p.64/mound" is the place where, once a year, low-status Pulayars (a former "untouchable" caste of agricultural labourers) sacrifice cocks to their own dangerous deities and ghosts, which are all figured by packs of stones strewn on the mound, amidst long grown grass cut only at festival time. On the border of the paddy fields, a tree inhabited by a Yakṣi receives a sacrifice at its foot once a year.²³ Such a combination of various ways for figuring and marking the presence of deities is absolutely typical of what can be observed in the majority of Kerala temples, whose patrons are landed castes of locally mid or high status. Moreover, cults addressed to deities made present by a combination of stones and specific trees assembled in a "grove" (*kāvū*) are widespread at all levels of society in the region.

Up to now, we have seen examples of divine figurations found in "ordinary" temples at the middle and upper levels of society. In the great centres of devotional pilgrimage, many more statues will be noticeable, be they for worship or for "decoration," but there will also always be places for subordinate deities marked only by stones, and some of the divine presences thought to be within the temple compound will remain invisible, with no specific place attributed to them. If we turn now to shrines kept by former untouchable people, we find

still less frequent and less elaborate anthropomorphic figurations of deities. When there is a temple, it may harbour movable, small images in metal or wood. But such temples are in fact quite rare. In most cases, ritual will be directed to open-air platforms or altars, where a few pebbles may be fixed: either a stone for each deity or a group of three or four pebbles for a single one. Quite often, there is not even a stone on the platform but only an oil lamp, occasionally lighted. There is thus nothing like an anthropomorphic figuration of the deities worshipped, except that an institutional medium may impersonate the main ones. At festival times, there might be small ritual diagrams drawn on the platforms, on which (or on the side of which) the ritual implements of the medium (weapon, bells, clothes) will be put. Subordinate deities and ghosts will receive worship on rough stones placed directly on the ground. The most dangerous beings might not have any permanent location at all, and will get only an occasional sacrifice on a temporary diagram-cum-altar elaborated specifically for the occasion and destroyed after the sacrifice is over.

These facts are of general relevance not only for Kerala but for the whole of India. Kerala might present peculiarities in the details of performing worship, but the main characteristics that have been **p.65/** described are found absolutely everywhere: gods can be, and do remain, invisible, “hidden,” as it is said in Maharashtra.²⁴ Most often their “residence” will be marked by a tree or a simple stone, or by various implements. It is only in the case of main cults (and not necessarily in all) that the deity gets a temple. And it is only in some temples that it is figured by an anthropomorphic image.

These facts are indeed already well known, and do not really come as a surprise, even if, by their very nature, the corresponding religious objects (when they exist) would not fill art museums. It appears, however, that they have not been taken seriously enough, and that their implications for the history of image worship have not been fully exposed. A few important consequences may be noted in particular.

We have seen that the theological view under discussion assumes that images are for “weak-minded” people. We have also seen that when translated in the sociological field, this view takes an elitist, Brahminic flavour, by equating caste status and strength of mind: low-status castes are deemed to be “weak-minded” (among other derogatory adjectives) compared with twice-borns. Empirical evidence shows, on the contrary, that the so-called “weak-minded” ones have definitely much less recourse to divine anthropomorphic images than higher castes, and especially than Brahmins. In fact, anthropomorphic figurations seem to occur in a very limited set of circumstances, mostly for some of the main deities among middle- and high-ranking castes. “Weak-minded” people manage very well indeed with invisible beings remaining invisible.

As a matter of fact, the theological view does not fit much better with observed rituals within the Brahminic world itself. First, the various texts followed nowadays for conducting temple worship impose on the priest an impressive work of mental imagining: his own ritual preparation requires that he meditate on the supreme formless God *before* proceeding to imagine him/her “with divisions” (thus in a reverse order of the “pedagogic” steps); then the cult of the image supposes a great number of mental visualizations implying a disjunction between the divine forms and the shape of the physical support (especially, but not only, in the case of an aniconic image like the *liṅga*; in the case of statues, as well, a given image might represent different deities according to the mantras recited, and the dress, makeup, and

external implements used). Second, as H  l  ne Brunner has shown well, there is no strict correspondence between the complex pantheon mentally and ritually installed and the divine / p.66/ images concretely found in a temple.²⁵ Thus, in Brahminic temples, too, invisible beings ritually installed far outnumber (and differ from) physical images: so much for the assertion that statues aim at helping devotees to concentrate on the divine through a direct sight of its forms.

If we consider that when a divine presence has a physical support, the latter is mostly aniconic (whether a li  ga, a simple stone, a tree, a weapon, or any other implement), it becomes difficult to say that their only function is to “represent” the concerned deity: clearly, they are largely meant to provide a tool for ritual operations. This would apply as well (though in a lesser way) to anthropomorphic figurations for which, in addition to the reciprocal “vision” (*dar  san*) hoped for by devotees, an essential dimension is to “play” with them and to “care” for them. In a word, these are not only images but also, in a crucial way, supports for human manipulations and actions. As Jean-Pierre Vernant remarked for ancient Greece, they are “made for being shown and hidden, taken for a walk and fixed, dressed and undressed, washed. The figure needs ritual for representing divine power and action.”²⁶ The whole matter of “representing” the divine appears therefore in a very different light from the one given by the theology discussed above.

Most supports of the divine, when they do exist, are not “images” in the sense of “imitations.” They do not pretend or aim (except in the case of anthropomorphic statues) to create an illusion, a resemblance. Instead, they possess many other simultaneous qualities and purposes: fixing the divine in a place, providing a support for meditation (as a variant of the idealistic stand has it), as well as for mental imagining, for ritual action, for offerings and sacrifices, etc. They do not “show” an image of the divine, however. Paraphrasing Jean Bazin, we may say that they aim less at a *representation* than at an *individuation*, becoming the body around which a space and its corresponding social practices are organized.²⁷

Let us recapitulate. The majority of divine beings in India remain invisible, undepicted. In their immense majority, objects signifying the presence of deities are not anthropomorphic statues and do not aim at imitating forms of the divine. Such objects, including anthropomorphic statues, cannot be separated from the ritual actions applied to them. Anthropomorphic statues in temples tend to be found at higher levels of society for higher levels of the pantheon. At all the social levels, the mental imagining of gods overwhelms by far their effective figurations. /p.67/ A theological affirmation that divine images are necessary for weak-minded people to concentrate on the Absolute is therefore interesting at the theological level, but appears very far from giving any clue to actual observed practice, even among Brahmins. Still, since it is so widely expressed, not only in current-day conversations but also in various texts over a long period of time, we have to try to understand its existence: why was it felt necessary to express such a view? What could have been its purpose? What does it tell us about society and religion in India?

An important hint may be taken from an analysis by Alexis Sanderson of the process of visualization of deities according to the Trika’s tantric tradition. The author recalls that there, too, “the forms of the deities in ritual and devotion are merely provisional, to be abandoned at higher levels of practice.”²⁸ He quotes in support the *Vij  n  abhairavatantra*, 12:

“For [all] these [forms] are strictly for the unenlightened. I have taught them only as a means of setting people on the right path, as a mother uses threats and sweets to influence her children’s behaviour.”²⁹ According to Sanderson, commentators in this tradition have discussed “how this gross level of practice, which after all was crucial to the institutional identity and hierarchy of these traditions, could still be seen as an effective means of liberation ... for those incapable of purely cognitive or immediate methods.”³⁰

The explicit pedagogy attributed to the cult of images appears here to be a contestation of an argument condemning the cult of images as an obstacle in the path of liberation. Within a general debate on the soteriological consequences of (ritual) acts, image worship is said to be a pedagogical device, at least for the “unenlightened.” This also provides a means for a commentator like Abhinavagupta to rank various Śaiva cults “according to the degree to which their methods approach ultimate, non-sequential intuition,”³¹ even though, in effect, a purely iconless cult seems never to have been realized. As Sanderson writes, “Abhinavagupta’s icon-less Anuttara cult never was and never could be a reality in action. His exegesis of the *Parātriṃśikā* is an exercise in translating ritual into pure thought, and ultimately into a metaphorical description of an absolute reality that cannot descend without distortion even into the sequence of ratiocination. The purpose of such writing was no doubt to prescribe an attitude of transcendence to be cultivated while performing rituals.”³²

In this context, the kind of theological view under discussion makes sense as part of a crucial and long-lasting debate pertaining to /p.68/ soteriology among religious elite, and specifically among ascetics. It entails, at the same time, a hierarchy within groups, all practising, nevertheless, various forms of image worship. But it does not pretend to be sociology or history, and it does not say that images are symbols: the debate bears only on the proper ritual means for attaining salvation. It seems worth exploring whether such a perspective can shed some light on the possible circumstances of early image worship in India and on its subsequent characterization in idealistic terms.

A Story of Beginnings

An ethnographer is certainly not in the best position to advance hypotheses on developments supposed to have taken place more than two thousand years ago. Still, any historical reconstruction has to take into account a few constraints, and there ethnography might be of some use. For instance, if it is recognized, as I suggest, that today’s cults are overwhelmingly non-figurative, especially at “popular” levels, it becomes very difficult to subscribe to any theory that would explain the development of image worship in terms of Brahminic concessions to the masses, such as the following one: “There remains the possibility, important for its effects on the later development of images, that some of the lower strata of the population worshipped images in human or animal form and that this practice gradually spread upwards to other sections of society.”³³ As a matter of fact, such a theory would have as a consequence that the “vulgar,” once staunch image worshippers, evolved in such a way that they are not image worshippers anymore, as is shown by ethnography. At the same time, an opposite evolution would have led the “other sections of society” to image worship. Such a crisscross seems definitely a most implausible assumption. Of course, comparison with present-day ethnography will never bring certainty. But since the

effective popular worship of deities imagined to have “human or animal form” is very seldom made through statues, it makes any bottom-to-top pressure in the past rather unlikely.

Similarly, a variant model that would suggest that Vedic-inspired cults imbibed progressively Dravidian ones, the latter being of course “idolatric,”³⁴ would meet with the same objections: today’s cults in South India (claimed often to have remained a region of “Dravidian culture,” whatever the expression might mean) do not exhibit at a popular level any particular emphasis on anthropomorphic image worship. No archeological evidence substantiates any specific link between ancient inhabitants of the subcontinent and anthropomorphic cults. True, since the time of the Indus civilization, small humanlike figures were known; however, their ritual use has yet to be understood. At any rate, such figures, often not very different from those made today by so-called “tribals” or low-status castes, for whom they are mostly offerings or ex-votos, do not seem to be in a position to explain image worship in temples, in the sense implied by the theology under discussion. We know next to nothing about ancient non-Vedic cults in India, but it is difficult to see any reason why they should have been necessarily focused on anthropomorphic statues.

These observations are consistent with what others have already noted, and concur, for instance, with Diana L. Eck’s statement: “India has ancient traditions of both iconic and aniconic image-making. The terracotta female ‘deities’ of the Indus Valley, for example, are certainly full-bodied representations of the female form, although it is not clear how they were utilized ritually ... The most ancient non-Vedic cultus of India was almost certainly aniconic. Stones, natural symbols, and earthen mounds signified the presence of a deity long before the iconic images of the great gods came to occupy the *sancta* of temples and shrines. Much of India, especially rural India, still designates its local deities in this way.”³⁵

The possibility that the origin and early development of image worship in India took place within the Brahminic world itself, or at least within a social elite, has therefore to be taken seriously. As already mentioned, such a hypothesis is akin to (and is inspired by) the analysis formulated by historian Peter Brown concerning the rise of the cult of saints in Latin Christianity.³⁶ Brown criticizes a widespread frame of explanation, the “two-tiered model,” according to which the change in religious attitude, corresponding to the rise of the cult of saints in late antiquity, was the consequence of a “capitulation” of Christian elites before modes of thought limited up to then to “the vulgar.”³⁷ This model relies on a presupposition, namely, that “the views of the potentially enlightened few are thought of as being subject to continuous upward pressure from habitual ways of thinking current among the ‘vulgar.’”³⁸ Brown suggests that this perspective in Western historiography comes directly from Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*, and stresses that “the result has been a tendency to explain much of cultural and religious history of late antiquity in terms of drastic ‘landslips’ in the relation between the elite and the masses. Dramatic /p.70/ moments of ‘democratization of culture’ or capitulation to popular needs are held to have brought about a series of ‘mutations’ of late-antique and early medieval Christianity.”³⁹ According to Brown, such an interpretation in terms of a “dialog” between elite and masses is of poor analytical return, and had better be replaced by an enlarged approach giving importance to localizing new forms of imagination, sensibility, and veneration within a changing set of social and political relations.

Drawing inspiration from this analysis, Gregory Schopen has shown, through a close scrutiny of early inscriptional evidence, that the early image cult in Indian Buddhism did not appear by virtue of a pressure from “the vulgar.” According to available documentation, images were the gifts of “learned nuns and monks”: “The earliest dated images in the Northwest were the gifts of learned monks ... it was learned monks who introduced images of the Buddha into the monastic cave complexes ... Though images were introduced at different times at different sites they were almost always introduced by the same group: everywhere either monks or nuns. It would appear that the image and its attendant cult were a major preoccupation of nuns and monks; that they everywhere introduced the cult and everywhere disproportionately supported it.”⁴⁰ Schopen concludes therefore that “changes in cult practice came from, and were supported by, learned ‘ascetic circles.’”⁴¹

Whatever might have been the exact interactions between early Buddhist image worship and the “Hindu” one (they are usually believed to have been quite close, or that the latter took shape in the steps of the former), there is no reason to suppose that the dynamics of their development should be in one case the obverse of the other. If Schopen is not misled, the evidence he uses and the conclusions he draws would point towards a development of “Hindu” iconography within a Brahminized social elite too, if not among ascetic circles.

It is usual, and certainly partly true, to explain the development of image worship as being rooted in a new mental disposition taking shape in the late Vedic age, as early as the seventh century BC. This period, marked by a kind of religious “ebullition” (mostly in the Ganges basin), saw, for instance, the birth and expansion of Buddhism, Jainism, the Ajivika movement, and the progressive elaboration of what would be later recognized as Brahminic “Hinduism.” These developments are usually thought to be linked to the expansion of agriculture and the emergence of new rural and urban elites and of new forms of political centralization. Among other characteristics, the *religious activities* of the period had in common that they all differed from the logic operating in Vedic rituals by proposing new perspectives on salvation and a pronounced personalization of the relationship between worshipper and deities. This personalized relationship has been characterized as an attitude of devotion including interaction with a god made easily accessible (in the contemporary context, it has been noted, for instance, that “the more the desire to draw nearer to God, the more the image is anthropomorphic”).⁴² Such evolutions in mentality are clearly perceptible in the late Vedic literature, especially in the *Upaniṣads*, where man is definitely in a new individual and internalized relation to the cosmos and to the Absolute as compared with his place as an element in the older world of sacrifice.

This could well have been the general context in which image worship developed. But devotion, *bhakti*, might not be the sole answer to the problem, since it evolved and reached the forms we know today *through* the very development of image worship. We should therefore be cautious not to project in ancient times forms of devotion evolved in later cults. I would suggest that *bhakti* was not necessarily the only, or the main, force behind early image worship, and that at least a few other factors should be considered.

Possibly the first to mention explicitly such a cult, Pāṇini (fourth century BC) says that one worships the images for his maintenance.⁴³ Similar perspectives are reasserted time and again in many later texts. For instance, according to Varāhamihira’s *Br̥hat Saṃhitā* (sixth

century AD) “an image, made of wood or clay, confers longevity, prosperity, strength and victory; one made of precious stones leads to the weal of the world; one of gold bestows health or growth; one of silver, fame; one of copper, increase or prosperity, of children; and an idol or Emblem of Śiva made of stone, influx of landed property.”⁴⁴ On the contrary, if damaged, the image brings destruction.⁴⁵ For Abhinavagupta (eleventh century AD), the details of iconographic visualizations of gods and goddesses are of special relevance for those who are performing desiderative rites.⁴⁶ And according to the Śaiva Āgamas studied by Hélène Brunner, “the cult is not a gratuitous act of worship. Whether executed by a private adept, in the solitude of any shelter, or by a priest officiating in a temple in the name of a human group more or less large, the cult aims at obtaining from the deity a favour, or a set of favours, perfectly well-defined and generally of a mundane order.”⁴⁷

Such attitudes still prevail today. An astrologer I met in Kerala in /p.72/ 1999, after regaling me with the usual pedagogic function of the idol, asserted that “God is considered as man [in his image] in order to make him work for the devotees.” Obviously, if devotional feeling was, and is, important in image worship, a very pragmatic dimension has also been crucial since early times and remains so today. The image, even anthropomorphic, cannot be separated from the ritual practised on it or with it, as well as from the material interests of the devotees. In this respect, in the first stages of its development, image worship might have shared with the former Vedic sacrifice a contrast with the ascetic search for liberation from the cycle of rebirths. The relationship between Vedic rites and temple rites poses its own problems, and has been widely debated in Brahminic circles.⁴⁸ But we should ponder whether image worship at its beginnings, in a new set of perceived relationships between man and cosmos, and in the context of speculations on the soteriological consequences of actions, was not felt like the sacrifice to be opposed to the pursuit of the Absolute because it was seen, fundamentally, as a *mundane* activity.

That images were not only meant to be seen but were also there to do things with, and to have things done through them, would accord better not only with observed practice but also with their relative theological devaluation in ancient times. The worship done for mundane results could not but be seen as alienating, keeping one in the bonds of successive rebirths: indeed a proof of “weak-mindedness” for ascetic-minded people, but still necessary. As Sanderson remarked, this was a good way to introduce a hierarchy of practices as well as of those who followed them. Paradoxically, then, the human-centred religious world of the late Vedic period and its visions of transcendence among new social elites can be seen as the crucible out of which both image worship and the development of asceticism have arisen, in a dialectic implying the concomitant depreciation of the former along with an admission of its usefulness.

It is commonly recognized that a private form of image worship preceded the public one in temples. Such an evolution may have had important consequences for the nature of the attitudes involved, and especially for the visual dimension of the cult. To again use Vernant’s words, in a public temple the image, like the temple itself, “bears a character of full publicity.” The house of god is no longer closed on a family or lineage but “open to the exterior, turned to the public.” Vernant writes: “Stopping from being anymore a privilege for the one in whose house he comes to reside, the god reveals his presence in a /p.73/ directly

visible way to the sight of everybody: under the City's gaze, he becomes form and spectacle ... Of the statue, we could say that all its 'esse' consists in a 'percipi', all its 'being' in a 'being perceived.' It has no other reality than its appearance, no other ritual function than to be seen ... Freed from ritual and placed under the impersonal gaze of the City, the divine symbol has transformed itself in an 'image' of the god."⁴⁹

Indian images in temples have not become "freed from ritual." But the suggestion that by becoming public their visual dimension has acquired a new importance seems illuminating for explaining the development of the fundamental notion of *darśan*, "vision" (and for the development of narrative iconography in sculptures as well, from a very early stage). This visual dimension, as I have just argued, was probably less at the heart of private worship, and therefore not necessarily involved in the introduction of anthropomorphic figures in the manner an explanation in terms of *bhakti* alone might suggest. But the development of temples may be seen to have provoked by itself a decisive shift in the way statues were considered, by putting a special emphasis on the visual interaction with devotees. Certainly, today's observations point towards a close connection between the construction of temples (as contrasted with open-air altars) and the tendency to use anthropomorphic statues of the divine.

Vernant's remarks also call attention to the social and political settings of such transformations. Public temples, and the statues therein, have been constructed in India through donations, and their various rituals have been initiated and supported through endowments. As Appadurai and Breckenridge observed for South Indian temples in modern times, this endowment basis of the temples' existence and development has had profound repercussions on public life, generating a complex system of economic redistribution, dispensing social prestige, and testifying to social power.⁵⁰ This is certainly linked to a dimension of "popularization," in the sense that their expansion has relied on their capacity to mobilize social forces outside the Brahminic fold. But this is a very relative popularization, since donors have been for long (and are still largely) a social elite, kings, chieftains, merchants, rural and urban notables. Clearly, it cannot be in any way conceived of as a concession to "the vulgar."

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Conclusion

To conclude, let me recall the limits of the present exercise and the sequence of arguments. We were first faced with a theological view according to which images are necessary as a pedagogical device for "weak-minded" people. This could be interpreted as meaning either all humans in the *Kaliyuga* or a section of society only, let us say "the vulgar." In this second interpretation, the theological view becomes a sociological and historical view. A second step has been to suggest that many academics, in the fields of art history and ancient history, seemed to hold views similar in content to the preceding one: images are symbols, and their origin should be ascribed to concessions to "the vulgar." At this point, the chapter has become an exercise in *constraints*, ethnography being used to state which requirements any historical explanation would have to satisfy: contrary to the above views, low-status castes use many various objects for making the divine present among them but seldom use images as such (and there will often be no figuration at all); conversely, anthropomorphic

statues will be found mostly in temples whose patrons are middle- and high-status castes. A model that would place “the vulgar” at the origins of image worship seems implausible, therefore. What follows, in the last section of this chapter, should be taken as a tentative demonstration that alternative models are *possible*. Some suggestions reproduce already well known interpretations, others are indeed conjectural. But should the hypotheses put forward prove wrong, any other set will nevertheless have to accord with the constraints put into evidence.

Thus, the theological proposition that “idols are made for the weak-minded as a first step for grasping the Absolute” should not be allowed to bear in any way on historical reconstructions. Instead, there is the need to replace the fragmentary archeological and textual evidence that we have in the context of what can be surmised of the economic and political transformations of ancient society, and particularly in the context of the intellectual and religious developments that took place among the elites of the period.

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Figure 1: Block of laterite for Serpent-Gods’ cult (Central Kerala, former “untouchable” caste)



Figure 2: Altar for Bhadrakālī (left side in the photo) and an ancestor (right side) (Central Kerala, former “untouchable” caste)



*Figure 3: Liṅga as Goddess Bhūvanēśvari
(Central Kerala, toddy-tappers caste)*



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*Figure 4: Bhairava as guardian deity (Śrī
Śantadurgā temple, Kavalem, Goa)*



*Figure 5: Altar for a male god (Central Kerala,
former “untouchable” caste)*



*Figure 6: Sword as Bhadrakāḷi (Sarkara temple,
South Kerala)*



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Figure 7: Metal mirror as Bhagavati (on the coconut placed on the stool); the officiant is a Brahmin (Central Kerala)



(detail not in the publication)



Figure 8 & 9:
Worship on small
maṇḍala (Central
Kerala, former
“untouchable”
caste).



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Notes

- 1 It is not always that all the twice-borns have the chance to be distinguished from “those without intelligence.” For instance, according to the *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad* studied by Bettina Bäumer, “the ritual which is pure is the one which confers liberation: in the case of Brahmins this is sacrifice, and for the three other classes image worship.” See Bettina Bäumer, “L’image divine, sa raison d’être et son effet selon la *Vāstusūtra Upaniṣad*,” in *L’image divine: Culte et méditation dans l’Hindouisme*, ed. André Padoux (Paris: CNRS éditions, 1990), 146. The translation into English, here as in further instances, is mine.
- 2 Compare with M.-J. Mondzain’s analysis of “idol” as a categorization of the way an image is looked at, as a “distinction in the imaginary relationship with invisibility”: the idol, according to her, can be defined as “an image that has to be killed.” See Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, icône*,

- économie: Les sources byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), 227-28. Although the author studies a much different context, the development of icons in Byzantium, this could apply to some extent to the "theological view" expressed at the beginning, but certainly not, I would argue, to most of actual practice in India.
- 3 *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, VIa.30.5, quoted in François Chenet, "L'Hindouisme, mystique des images ou traversée de l'image?" in *L'image divine*, ed. Padoux, 161.
 - 4 Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, "Image animée, image vivante. L'Image du culte hindou," *L'image divine*, ed. Padoux, 118 n. 6.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, 121.
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- 6 Ravi Varma, "Rituals of Worship," in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, 4: 453, quoted in Clémentin-Ojha, "Image animée, image vivante," 115 n. 2.
 - 7 B.C. Bhattacharya, *Indian Images: The Brāhmanic Iconography, Based on Genetic, Comparative and Synthetic Principles* (1921; reprint ed., New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1978), xviii.
 - 8 Alain Daniélou, *Le polythéisme hindou* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1975), 542.
 - 9 Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*. The Pelican History of Art (1953; new ed., London: Penguin Books, 1970), 28.
 - 10 T.A. Gopinatha Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 2 vols. (1914; reprint ed., Delhi, Indological Book House, 1971), 1: 26.
 - 11 Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (1977; new ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Catherine Weinberger-Thomas, "Le crépuscule des dieux: regards sur le polythéisme hindou et l'athéisme bouddhique (XVIIe-XIXe siècle)," *History and Anthropology* 3 (1987). The opposition between an enlightened Indian elite rejecting the cult of idols, and other people, was already explicit in European texts of the eighteenth century. See Sylvia Murr, "Indianisme et militantisme protestant. Veysière de la Croze et son *Histoire du Christianisme des Indes*," *Dix-huitième siècle* 18 (1986): 309.
 - 12 Parul Dave Mukherji, "The Career of a Classical Aesthetic Text: The *Citra Sutra* in Modern India," communication presented at the International Conference on "The Politics of Authenticity: The Case of Visual Modern Arts in India," Paris, 7-9 February 2001.
 - 13 Quoted in Gopinatha Rao, *Hindu Iconography*, 1: 4. Compare with: "It may well be asked how it came to pass that Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism alike became 'idolatrous' religions. The answer to this question was admirably expressed by Jacobi over forty years ago: 'I believe that this worship had nothing to do with original Buddhism or Jainism, that it did not originate with the monks, but with the lay community, when the people in general felt the want of a higher cult than that of their rude deities and demons.'" A.K. Coomaraswamy, "The Origin of the Buddha Image," *Art Bulletin* 9 (1927): 297, quoted in Gregory Schopen, "On Monks, Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism," *Artibus Asiae* 49, nos. 1-2 (1989): 154. For a critical historiography of the question, see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), ch. 3.
 - 14 Günther D. Sontheimer, "Religious Endowments in India: The Juristic Personality of Hindu Deities," *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Rechts Wissenschaft* 1 (1964): 45.
 - 15 Günther D. Sontheimer, "Hinduism: The Five Components and Their **/p.80/** Interaction," in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. G.D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (Delhi: Manohar, 1989), 204.
 - 16 Gopinatha Rao, *Hindu Iconography*, 1: 27.
 - 17 Peter Brown, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Schopen, "Monks, Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices."
 - 18 Gopinatha Rao, *Hindu Iconography*, 1: 10-11.

- 19 Chenet, "L'Hindouisme."
- 20 Clémentin-Ojha, "Image animée."
- 21 This formulation draws on Jean-Pierre Vernant, "De la présentification de l'invisible à l'imitation de l'apparence," in *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs: Etudes de psychologie historique*, rev. and augm. ed. (Paris: La Découverte, 1985).
- 22 A detailed ethnography of this festival is provided in Gilles Tarabout, *Sacrifier et donner à voir en pays malabar: Les fêtes de temple au Kérala (Inde du Sud), approche anthropologique* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême Orient, 1986), ch. 3.
- 23 Ibid., ch. 6.
- 24 Bernard Delfendahl, "Les dieux dans les champs d'un village du Maharashtra (Inde): Essai d'ethnographie religieuse," Ph.D. dissertation, École des Hautes Études en Science Sociales, 1968, 106.
- 25 Hélène Brunner, "L'image divine dans le culte agamique de Siva: Rapport entre l'image mentale et le support concret du culte," in *L'image divine*, ed. Padoux, 18-19. On the mental visualizations that the temple priest has to perform for worshipping images, see also Gérard Colas, "Le yoga de l'officiant vaikhānasa," *Journal Asiatique* 276 (1988); André Padoux, "Image mentale, méditation et culte dans la Śrīvidyā (Quelques exemples tirés du Yoginīhṛdaya)," in *L'image divine*, ed. Padoux.
- 26 Jean-Pierre Vernant, "De la présentification de l'invisible à l'imitation de l'apparence," in *Mythe et pensée*, 344.
- 27 Jean Bazin, "Retour aux choses-dieux," in *Corps des dieux*, ed. Charles Malamoud and Jean-Pierre Vernant, Le temps de la réflexion 6 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 264.
- 28 Alexis Sanderson, "The Visualization of the Deities of the Trika," in *L'image divine*, ed. Padoux, 74.
- 29 Ibid., 75.
- 30 Ibid., 77.
- 31 Ibid., 78.
- 32 Ibid., 82.
- 33 A.G. Mitchell, *Hindu Gods and Goddesses* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1982), v.
- /p.81/**
- 34 See particularly Inden, *Imagining India*, 119-21.
- 35 Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine in India*, 2nd enlarged ed. (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1985), 32-33.
- 36 Brown, *Cult of Saints*.
- 37 Ibid., 16-17.
- 38 Ibid., 17.
- 39 Ibid., 17-18.
- 40 Schopen, "Monks, Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices," 166.
- 41 Ibid., 167.
- 42 Clémentin-Ojha, "Image animée," 132.
- 43 N.R. Bhatt, "Development of Temple Rituals in India," in *Śiva Temple and Temple Rituals*, ed. S.S. Janaki (Madras: Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute, 1988), 33.
- 44 Var(hamihira, *Bṛhat Saṃhitā*, ed. and trans. M. Ramakrishna Bhat, 2 vols., 2nd rev. ed. (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 2: 568-69 (ch. 60, 4-5).
- 45 Ibid., 569 (ch. 60, 6).
- 46 Sanderson, "Visualization of the Deities," 67-68.
- 47 Brunner, "L'image divine," 13.

48 I am of course aware of the very strong opposition voiced for centuries by orthodox Brahmin circles against image service in temples, which is often taken by scholars as proof of the non-Brahmin origin of image worship. In line with my argument, I would submit that Brahmins did not necessarily present a homogeneous front in that respect. This was pointed out, for instance, by Ronald Inden, "Changes in the Vedic Priesthood," in *Ritual, State and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J.C. Heesterman*, ed. A.W. Van den Hoek, D.H.A. Kolff, and M.S. Oort (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), and by Heinrich von Stietencron, "Orthodox Attitudes towards Temple Service and Image Worship in Ancient India," *Central Asiatic Journal* 21, no. 2 (1977). The latter, specifically, underlines that "the reasons for the controversy can certainly not be reduced to a caste conflict. It was not merely a question of defence of Brāhmanic privileges against a new group of religious specialists rising from lower strata of society. The texts rather suggest that the conflict was mainly within the Brāhman class" (126).

49 Vernant, "Présentification de l'invisible," 347.

50 Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, "The South Indian Temple: Authority, Honour and Redistribution," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, n.s. 10, no. 2 (1987). See also Burton Stein, "Temples in Tamil Country, 1300-1750 A.D.," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 14, no. 1 (1977), where the author shows how temples in Tamil Nadu were **p.82/** crucial stakes in the competition for landed dominance among Tamil landed groups.

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