

On the Worshipping of Images

Mudrarakshas

The Hindi original appeared in Lucknow in the newspaper *Svatantra bhārat* on 6 November 1993. This translation © 2020 Robert A. Hueckstedt.

In the past few days this slogan has been written on walls all over the place: *jis hindū kā khūn na khaulā, khūn nahīn vah pānī hai* (The Hindu whose blood doesn't boil has water in his veins!) Such language should never be used among those who call themselves Hindu. After all, the Gita provides us a strong admonition against anger. "From desire arises anger and from anger delusion. Because of delusion memory becomes faulty, due to a faulty memory intellectual discrimination is destroyed, and with that all is lost."

Anger has frightening consequences. Are those who are trying to spread anger amongst us in fact setting the foundation for our society's destruction? If we have even a little faith in Krishna's words in the Gita, then the present situation should put us on our guard.

Another slogan was written next to the one cited above. It said: *rām lalā ham āēge mandir vahīn banāēge* (We're coming, dear Ram; right there we're going to build your temple.) Clearly, the root cause of this frenzy is the desire to build a temple and therein establish an image.

Is the construction of temples and the worshipping of images in temples a religious requirement of our society?

I should make it clear at the outset that Swami Dayanand Sarasvati, along with many other great thinkers and religious leaders, among whom Gautam Buddha occupies the first rank, was opposed to images and the worshipping of images. It is an entirely different matter that many years after his death images of Buddha began to be made and worshipped. Kabir and other sants were also strongly opposed to the worship of images, although even images of Kabir, too, are being worshipped today.

The worship of the images of deities is not practiced only in India. It is a custom found the world over, and the most important and fundamental aspect of such faiths is the image itself. Arabs worshipped images until the Prophet Muhammad was able to put a stop to it. Images of gods were worshipped in the societies of ancient Greece and Rome, and while the early Christians were opposed to the idolatry of their Greek and Roman contemporaries, their churches later began to house images that were worshipped by the faithful. Before Christianity Egyptian society not only worshipped images but the temples themselves was also influential.

In India we have some images from the period of the Indus Valley Civilization. Clearly, they had something akin to Rudra, and a form of Paśupati was probably widely worshipped. In the Vedas there is no injunction for the worship of images, nor is there any mention of such a practice in the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas or the Upaniṣads. The Vedas contain passages of worship for many deities, but no mention is made of the worship of images of those deities. Buddha was born over 2500 years ago, and during his lifetime there was much mention of brahman scholars, but one has to look hard to find any mention at all of the worshipping of images or of temples for the deities.

Nevertheless, another question now arises. Whether the worship of images was an ancient practice in India or not, whether the Vedas enjoined the worship of images or not, can we establish the contemporary concept of image worship from some other angle?

Some of the greatest poets in our history, Sūrdās, Tulsīdās, Vidyāpati, Jayadev, and that unique devotee Caitanya Mahāprabhu, practiced the worship of images. They took pleasure in that material form of the divine. By rejecting image worship we would also be rejecting that very important stream of our cultural heritage. In Swami Dayanand Sarasvati's point of view all of India's devotees were poets, in fact, cultural treasures for the entire world. So it is not all that easy to wipe out image worship, and perhaps, if we had taken Adi Shankaracharya's words literally, we would not have been able to give the world such profound poetry.

While the tradition of image worship has provided us with many excellent literary and cultural artefacts, this same tradition has also endowed us, to no small degree, with sectarian superstitions, ignorance and a wanting educational system. The same kind of stupidities that have arisen in the world of business and commerce and in the arena of political power also took root in the tradition of image worship. In the marketplace

it is not wrong for someone to sell goods made by someone else, to have someone else make the goods that he sells, or to organize the buying and selling that goes on in the marketplace. Such activities are wrong only when the original maker of the product is deprived of a fair value for his work or when the purchaser is cheated, having to pay more than the fair value of the product, or when the product has been adulterated, is not genuine, or has a jacked-up price due to hoarding. The same thing has occurred in politics. It was perfectly fine for an individual to become king who was intent on preserving and administering the laws that had been established by society for the welfare of the people. The trouble started only when the king's abominable, wicked and depraved son became king. With such a person king it became customary for every newly-wedded bride to spend her first night with the king, and intoxicated with his power the king began the practice of having someone murdered simply because he didn't like his face.

Let's not forget here that India's first king, Wen, was democratically elected for the welfare of the people. Brahmans, however, assassinated Wen in his own court because he did not give enough concern and attention to the welfare of brahmans. The claim that the welfare of brahmans should be society's primary concern corrupted the tradition of image worship, too.

Very soon after the Vedic period the right to read and write became restricted to brahmans alone. Krishna himself, best of all the siddhas, thought highly of Kapila, but since Kapila was believed to be of a low caste, and despite being the profound formulator of Samkhya philosophy, no brahman would teach him. According to Adi Shankaracharya the philosopher Kapila had to teach himself. Later, the *Brāhmāṇḍ Purāṇ* declared that the students of Kapila who studied Samkhya were themselves thereby untouchable.

When the brahmans made Wen's son king, he vowed to them that he would concern himself exclusively with the welfare of brahmans. Things reached such a point, even, that in the *Dharmasūtra* Gautam wrote that if a brahman and a king approached each other on a road, it was the king who should give way. And in that same text he wrote that the king has authority over everyone but not over brahmans. The leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party, who are demanding that India have one common law code and that the country be run according to the ancient dharm shastras, should realize that there never was a common law, especially for

brahmans.

It also became a part of the system of the society in those days that the king was always supposed to conduct his affairs according to the advice of brahmans. In Kalinga, right in the royal court brahmans assassinated the king because, against their advice, he was about to make a man from the barber caste the Head General of the Army. Since the *Manusmriti* and other such texts had proclaimed before this time that brahmans were not to be killed nor were they to suffer any punishment, despite their assassination of kings right in the open, they never paid for their crimes. After all, Yaskacharya had claimed that Vidyā belonged to the brahman, and Vashishth, Gautam, Apastamb, Manu, Baudhayan, Yajnavalkya and others maintained that the brahman, and the brahman only, had the right to an education.

No doubt at all exists that on that topic there were other opinions because while Manu never tires of expressing the superiority of the brahman, he occasionally mentions that one could learn worthwhile things from the shudra as well. That idea, however, remained merely an exception. The writers of the dharm sutras kept on expanding the area of brahman superiority, to the point that Jaimini, Katyayan and others maintained that only a brahman could be a purohit.

Progressively, and without any debate, society allowed only brahmans to become temple priests, purohits for domestic rituals, the performers of sacrifices and the paṇḍas at pilgrimage places. Once brahmans had attained those positions, and once they alone had the power to establish the rules for virtuous conduct, right character and ritualistic and everyday activities, superstitions began to become engrained in the people such that in one form or another brahmans could make a profit in any situation.

Thus an entire body of ritual began dominating the temples. The average person was frightened into believing that if he didn't go to temple, in his next life he would have neither wealth nor power. The wealthy man was told that if he didn't go to temple he would either lose his money or be unable to make any more.

This superstition pervaded society to such an extent that it took on ludicrous forms. Even prostitutes and robbers began worshipping images. The pindaris, thugs and bandits of the previous century would regularly take darshan of Devi after having killed and robbed someone, donating a portion of their loot to the goddess.

That group of priests who made their livelihood directly from the

temples wrote a number of books in which they said that no matter what sin you commit, just go to such-and-such a pilgrimage place or temple, and you'll be released from your sin. The worship of images, then, made the sinner and criminal fearless. He became convinced that now he could do anything, swindling, burglary, robbery, rape, or murder, and he had nothing to fear. All he had to do was say the name of Ram once and he would be forgiven for his crimes, in both a legal and a spiritual sense. So while at one time in his history man committed a sin only hesitatingly and with fear for the effect that would have on his soul, now, in the age of the worshipping of images, he can commit any sin he likes without a thought.

This tradition put an end to one other good achievement of our civilization. The Gita taught us the profound philosophy of selfless activity. That, too, has been destroyed. Now a man low in our society's ranks is told that if you are oppressed by poverty, if you are threatened and beaten simply because of your low birth, and if you are forced to work for little or no wages and are flogged with the whip, you must bear all that silently and you'll be rewarded in your next life. The cracker of the whip, however, is told, do whatever you feel like, then chant the name of Ram once and you'll spend eternity with the beautiful nymphs of heaven.

For millions of our miserable countrymen a temple's image provides spiritual contentment and a connection to important moral values. It quenches their thirst for moral understanding and for a sense of the beautiful. That same image, however, also guarantees the tyranny of the strong over the weak.

If it is to remain a part of our culture, the image must be freed from the influence of the selfish sinner, from the proselytizer of superstition and from those who live off evil.