

# The Image and its Meaning in Popular Hindu Ritual

by  
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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 1, No.4. © World Wisdom, Inc.  
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THE religious systems which forbid the use of physical objects as foci of ritual and worship are probably fewer in number than those which allow or even enjoin it. Even the Semitic religions which denounce "idolatry" have not prevented their adherents from attaching sanctity to certain physical symbols, images or locations, and from treating these virtually as cult objects. However the techniques of worship and modes of thinking which at least the purist or "protestant" members of these religions condemn and attempt to eradicate from their own folds constitute an unquestionable precondition of religious existence for the adherents of most other religious systems.

This does not mean that the use of images and sacred cult objects in religions which permit them is without theory or rationale; rather the contrary is true. Frequently the ideas implicit in the use of such objects are of a piece with the worshipper's world-view. Thus in seeking an answer to the question of how a particular people justify their use of images we may also discover much about their attitude to the divine world and the ways in which they expect to communicate with it through the medium of ritual.

In this article I wish to discuss the function and meaning of the tangible object in popular Hindu worship. I shall use the term "image" freely here in a broad sense to denote whatever can constitute the focus of a person's worship, whether this be an icon, an aniconic symbol, even a location (such as a shrine or part of a shrine) or a feature of nature which is felt to embody some holy being and to which ritual is directed. All of these things can, to Hindus, reflect the personality of some deity and hence be his "image." The focus of a cult should also be distinguished very strictly from the tools used in the ritual, which naturally come to be endowed with sanctity or regarded as having symbolic properties, but which have a purely instrumental role in the ritual. For instance, the flowers, holy water, rice and other items used in much popular Hindu worship are certainly "consecrated" but they contribute to the ritual rather than form its focus.

The use of images in Hinduism is not a new theme, and the only novelty in this article will be that I shall discuss the problem from the point of view of popular village Hinduism; I shall not mention the ritual used in the great temples as I have had but scant opportunity to make detailed observations of this, nor shall I attempt to take into account the classical literary expressions of Hinduism—in which of course theories about the use of images feature—since this would be beyond my scope as a social anthropologist as well as being beyond the range of experience of the largely unlettered population I studied. However I think that the ideas and practices of the village folk which I shall describe demonstrate the consistency of these various aspects of Hinduism and not the reverse.

Where I describe village Hinduism I use material which I collected during a year's stay in a North Indian hill village situated in Himachal Pradesh. I have no means of knowing whether what I have recorded is true of all Hindu villages but the existing literature suggests that it is not untypical of other areas of Hindu India.

Where I interpret Hindu ritual as I saw it I have naturally used terms which the unlettered peasant<sup>1</sup> might not feel able to articulate explicitly himself. But I hope that my interpretations do not depart widely from the ideas implicit in the ritual which he uses and that I have not fallen into the trap of imposing my own ideas on the material at hand. (I have taken into account villagers' own statements on the subject wherever these were available).

First of all it is necessary to outline the general role of ritual in the religious life of the villagers and the basic philosophy which underlies the practice of the ritual.

Popular Hinduism is linked with the propitiation of a multiplicity of divine beings which are termed *devatas*, or gods, yet these beings do not constitute the highest source of divine power of which the villager is aware. Certainly Hindu villagers perceive a reality which is higher than the devatas. This God (Bhagwan or Paramatma) is immanent in all living things. He is the source of all being and nothing lives or moves without his willing it to do so. He is transcendent yet omnipresent—there is no place where He is not. But though He is regarded as omnipresent and omnipotent, God is not—like the *Brahman* of Vedantic doctrine—regarded as entirely impersonal. He is seen as essentially good, taking a loving and forgiving interest in the actions and welfare of His devotees. Devotion to God is shown by prayer and "remembrance" of Him and villagers state that ideally prayer to God should be a daily activity. But prayer and remembrance here denote the cultivation of a mental attitude and have no reference to ritual. No specific ritual is addressed to God as such. He has no shrines or temples nor any visible cult.

The reverse is true of the various gods or devatas. It could be said that God is regarded as "personal" but as without definable personality; "the gods" however are seen as having more or less distinct attributes and characteristics. God cannot be visualized and hence cannot be represented or portrayed; most devatas can very well be visualized and in popular iconography each known deity can be identified by his or her typical appearance and symbols. Though not, like ordinary mortals, limited in their existence to one point in space by confinement to a physical body, the gods are not in practice seen as indwelling in all things as is God Himself; hence it is possible for there to be places in which a particular god is more present than in others—there can be temples and shrines dedicated to the gods as well as images in their likeness, while God has neither temple nor image. Worship of the gods, unlike worship of God, takes the form of ritual and this ritual constitutes the greater part of the observable religious activity of the village.

The function of the gods in human life is also different. Whereas God sustains and directs the workings of the world and the men who live in it in a universal way, the gods enter into human life in a very immediate fashion, causing specific events to occur through their favour or anger. Hence, while the worship of God through remembrance and prayer is an activity meritorious for its own sake, the gods are chiefly worshipped with a view to gaining specific benefits for the worshipper, either by averting their anger or by cultivating their goodwill.

The fact that only one term exists in the English language to denote both God (Bhagwan) and the gods (*devatas*) makes it the more difficult to discuss the conceptual distinctions implicit in the villager's use of two separate words. Yet in spite of these distinctions both Bhagwan and the plurality of deities are regarded as divine in the sense that this term is normally understood in English. For both God and the gods exist on a plane of purity and holiness which is far above that of mortal men. They constitute different modes of divinity with which men can commune in different ways and for different purposes—with God through inward prayer and meditation, and with the gods through largely ritual means.

The sophisticated intellectual or the philosophically inclined Hindu might regard the *devatas* as the more manifest forms of one divine principle. Alain Daniélou, for instance, expounding the theory of Hindu polytheism, has described the different deities as various "aspects of divinity . . . the abstract prototypes of the forms of the manifest world . . . Any of these forms can be used indifferently as a support through which ritual or meditation can reach the Principle of which they are the images, the manifest aspects."<sup>2</sup> The villagers would not express his notions of divinity in this kind of language, but it would not be contrary to his essential picture of the universe. Only where an intellectual such as Daniélou sees an abstract hierarchy of concepts, ranging from the least manifest downwards to the most manifest aspects of the divine, the villager (having a more personalized view of the world) sees a hierarchy of divine beings, ranging from the all-powerful Bhagwan via the major divinities down to the lesser and local spirits and gods.

Setting aside for the moment the question of the non-ritualized worship directed to the supreme Bhagwan, I now offer a description of the rituals addressed to the different deities. I cannot hope to describe here all the different religious activities which take place in the village, but even a superficial observation will reveal that there are two main kinds of ritual activity, namely (1) individual acts of worship directed to particular *devatas* which do not require the services of a priest and (2) the complex rites conducted in Sanskrit by a Brahman priest on behalf of a client. The most important rites in the latter category are the "sanskaras" or rites of passage which mark the different points in an individual's progress through the socially and religiously recognised stages of life.

I will deal with the former category of rites first of all. Hindu villagers worship their deities because they feel that the gods can help them in meeting the problems and crises of day-to-day living. Worship is performed not so much because it is felt to be spiritually beneficial to the worshipper or as an end in itself, although it is undoubtedly regarded as a morally worthy activity, but because the worshipper hopes to gain the favour or avert the disfavour of a particular deity thereby.

Deities are thought to express their anger or favour by withholding or conferring material blessings—such as prosperity or good health. As a consequence of this belief the villager will interpret specific cases of illness or misfortune as evidence of the anger of some deity and will take pains to discover which god is responsible for his distress. He will attempt to appease that deity as speedily as possible in order to remove his trouble, whatever its nature, in offering worship. But worship is not only performed as a reaction to trouble. A person may worship a chosen deity in order positively to gain its favour and cause a desired event to take place; thus people frequently make vows to worship a particular deity if the latter, through its favour, grants their desire. The boon requested may be the successful betrothal of a son or daughter, the birth of an heir, a good harvest,

the return of money loaned, or any of a host of other hoped-for ends. One woman I knew even vowed to worship a particular deity if her children passed their annual school examinations. The gods are thus thought of as potential sources of both help and hindrance in the practical matters of living and are turned to for aid and relief in all the crises, great and trivial, of everyday life.

I now turn to the techniques used in the worship of deities. As I have shown, the practical ends which the worshipper hopes to achieve by worship may vary—he may desire the cure of an illness, relief from financial distress, etc.—but the general principles underlying worship are always the same, namely, to please the deity which he feels most likely to help him in the problem at hand. What kind of thing, then, is regarded as giving the deities pleasure or as soothing their wrath? The mere supplication of the worshipper evidently does not suffice in itself, though a reverent attitude is of course required. The ritual of a physical sacrifice is deemed necessary as the correct mode of propitiation, and this offering is made in the following way.

The worshipper must first purify himself by bathing and ideally also donning a clean suit of clothes, although this is not always feasible for peasant folk who may not possess more than one or two outfits of clothing; nonetheless it is done where possible. To approach the deity a state of more than everyday purity is necessary since divine beings are conceived as essentially purer than mere humans. The worshipper then places the image of the deity before him and prepares it also for the ritual of offering. Although I have used the term "image" it must not be imagined that an actual statue is always used. A framed print depicting the deity concerned, of the type available in the bazaars of any small town, or a traditionally recognized symbol of the deity can equally be employed. The nature of the physical representation is not very important so long as it is felt in some way to embody the deity to which the worship is addressed. Ritual attention is then paid to the image—if possible it is bathed with clean water, red "tika" is applied and the auspicious red thread used in much Hindu customary ceremony is bound round it. Incense is also burned before it. All these attentions are considered pleasing to the deity. The culmination of the ritual sequence takes place in the actual presentation of the offering to the god. The latter normally consists of food of some kind; conventionally some kind of sweet pudding or cake is prepared but the nature of the offering will to some extent vary with the nature of the occasion and the identity of the deity, as there are some deities which are conceived as having special predilections for certain types of offering. However whatever is offered must be "pure," that is prepared by someone in a ritually pure state in a kitchen previously purified by a fresh application of cowdung plaster on the floor. (Blood offerings do not seem to be usual in this part of India although live animals are occasionally offered to certain specific deities. For example live chickens are considered acceptable to the strange fairy-like powers known as the "Agassia"; women often visit their shrine in order to obtain offspring and release live fowls there. Live goats are commonly offered at the chief shrine of the saint Baba Balak Nath (though not at his lesser village shrines). A morsel of the offering is presented to the image, pressed against the "mouth" of the icon, whilst the devotee makes his request to the god, either uttered aloud or repeated inwardly.

The peasant is not so naïve as to assume that the food offered is actually consumed by the god and in any case he only presents a token portion. It is the act of presentation which is important rather than the quantity offered and the acceptance of the token portion

sanctifies the whole. The remainder is then distributed by the sacrificer amongst his friends and family as "prasada"—consecrated food. This food is held to convey the favour of the deity to whomsoever consumes it, so that the consumption of prasada (and here again only a token portion need be taken for the gesture to be effective) is an act of piety in itself. The distribution of prasada is not just a secular concomitant of a religious act (although for people who so seldom have the opportunity to savour sweets and delicacies in their rather monotonous daily diet eating prasada is enjoyable for its own sake also). It rather demonstrates the way in which sacrificial worship becomes a form of communion between deity and devotee; the sacrificer approaches the god with his offering and his request, and the god replies by sanctifying the offering and conveying blessings to all those who consume it. The devotee naturally expects that his request will also be granted and if it is not then it is usually assumed that the rites were not correctly performed; alternatively it may be that some other deity should have been approached as the one responsible for the trouble the worshipper is trying to remove or as more powerful or willing to assist him in attaining the good he desires.

I have described here only the bare essentials of the acts by which villagers seek to propitiate their gods. Since no ritual specialist needs to be called in to conduct or supervise proceedings, individuals are very free to vary the details according to their own inclinations. Most ritual taking place in the village, apart from the Sanskrit rites I shall describe later, are but variations, elaborations or extensions of this simple ritual sequence. In my view this sequence illustrates most typically the role of the image in village Hinduism.

In fact an image or symbol is not invariably used when deities are worshipped. There may be none available to the worshipper; peasants do not usually own more than one carved image although they often own large numbers of brightly coloured prints depicting the deities most popular locally. Indeed the interiors of the village houses I visited were often literally covered with such prints alongside posters of filmstars, family photographs, pictures cut from magazines, calendars and advertisements. If a person does not possess an image of the deity he wants to worship he will try to borrow one from a neighbour or relative, or if there is a local shrine dedicated to that deity he will conduct the offering at the shrine. Here again, even if the shrine (as is quite often the case) contains no representation of the god this is of no consequence for the ritual performed there. Whatever part of the shrine—often a particular stone—is held to be the special locus of the god is treated exactly as if it were an image and the ritual attentions I have described are directed to it. In the absence of any image, symbol, or shrine, the offering can still be made; the devotee will then simply choose any convenient spot, usually in his own home, which is likely to be free from impurity and will there make the offering accompanied only by his supplicatory request for the deity's favour. The use of a physical cult object is thus not indispensable to ritual; rites can and do take place without one. It does however lend coherence and direction to the ritual sequence of sacrifice and is a logical desideratum. I do not think that peasants would be able to express their attitude to the image in such explicit terms, but their marked preference for the use of an image when one is available and the efforts they make to obtain one for the purpose of worship do, I think, demonstrate their tacit recognition of its logical desirability.

Like the sophisticated images used in the great Hindu temples of India, the cruder images used in the village are fashioned according to a traditional iconography. Anyone

familiar with the local pantheon can identify the images seen in local shrines and houses by their attributes. The goddess Durga is always depicted as mounted on her tiger steed, just as she is in her well-known temples, and the category of deified ascetics known as *Siddhs* are always shown as sitting in a meditative pose and can also be symbolically depicted merely by replicas of the itinerant ascetic's wooden sandals, which indeed replace or serve as images in some shrines dedicated to Siddhs. The most famous of the *Siddhs*, Baba Balak Nath, is easily recognized in popular iconography since he is invariably portrayed as a small boy. This is because the god Shiva is said to have conferred the gift of immortality upon him when he was but a lad, and his body never developed further physically after that time.

Even when no known image exists, the appearance of a deity always seems to be known to the villagers who worship it. The water deity known by the seemingly Muslim name *Khwajah*, for example (who to my knowledge has no image in any of the shrines in the locality with which I am familiar) is described by peasants as wearing blue (or sometimes white) clothes and as being mounted upon a blue horse. This ability to describe the attributes and appearance of a deity is not merely a sign of the villagers vivid fancy but illustrates their deep conviction that the gods do really manifest themselves to men in physical forms. The devatas are not remote beings whose nature men can only guess at, but are intimately concerned with human affairs and both can and do reveal themselves to men in characteristic guises. One way in which gods manifest themselves to men is in dreams. This is frequently the means by which a person becomes aware of the identity of the deity responsible when he is suffering from some persistent illness or misfortune. In the dream the dreamer recognizes the deity by the typical form in which the latter appears to him and will later hasten to appease the god by making an offering as soon as possible. But gods also reveal themselves to men in their waking state. One local deity, Baba Sindhu, is said to manifest himself to people quite often as an old man with a long white beard or as an old shepherd. Again men have direct experience of the gods when the latter descend to possess people at certain annual festivals; under the influence of the drumming and singing of low caste musicians some men are able to fall into a kind of trance and will begin to jerk and dance in an uncanny fashion. In this ecstatic state the subject may actually see the deity who is possessing him approach and will sometimes announce the deity's coming in excited tones, describing the deity by its known attributes.

In short the deities are regarded as, if not at all times visible, then essentially seeable, hence portrayable and essentially accessible to human experience. They do not manifest themselves in randomly chosen forms but are seen as mixing in human affairs in regular guises by which they can also be depicted in images and prints. Though they are not confined to any one physical body or place they can have embodiments, unlike the abstract concept of Bhagwan who is above physical manifestation.

In this context it might be appropriate also to mention shrines and the role they play in village religion, as well as the images they house. The shrines found in the villages in the area I studied were typically small structures of varying form and design, from a simple slab of stone set underneath a tree to a small temple which could be entered by one or two people at a time. Worship of the type I have just described can take place at a shrine although it can equally well be conducted at home if the individual so wishes. When it is performed at a shrine the image in the shrine is treated in much the same way as the image of the small portable type normally used in home worship, that is, it will be bathed,

incense burned etc., and the offering made to it. If there is no image in the shrine, as is quite commonly the case, these attentions are directed to whatever part of the shrine seems to constitute its focus or centre. Usually this will be some conventional symbol of the deity who inhabits the shrine, such as the "lingam" in the case of Shiva. Quite frequently shrines contain some apparently neutral object, usually a stone, which is thought to embody the deity in some way. I remember one shrine dedicated to the god Thakur, a form of Vishnu, which contained no image. Outside its entrance however lay a rather large boulder generally referred to as "Thakur" itself. A local tale relates how a certain farmer many years ago had used this stone to weight down the jute he was soaking in a nearby stream, unaware that what he was using was anything other than an ordinary rock. But he began to be troubled by dreams in which the angry deity appeared to him demanding that he replace the stone. Thoroughly frightened he did this, and also built the shrine which stands to this day, and only then did he cease to be visited by these dreams. Many other local shrines, such as ones dedicated to Shiva and Khwajah, contain stones rather than images. Often there is nothing whatsoever which would appear unusual or noteworthy about these stones, yet they are evidently held to represent the deities whose temples house them and are treated in every way as are the representational images. At some shrines there is no object at all which could conceivably be treated as an image or symbol of the deity concerned. This was true of a newly constructed shrine dedicated to a local deity known as Baba Sindhu which was situated under a pipai tree in the village where I stayed. This consisted simply of a neatly made stone platform near the foot of the tree. When worship takes place at such shrines the ritual attentions which would normally be directed to an image are omitted, but the offering—the climax of the ritual sequence—is not omitted, the portion destined for the deity simply being deposited at the shrine.

To communicate with the gods through simple ritual actions at crises in his everyday life the villager needs no priestly specialist as intermediary. He can perform all the necessary actions himself and (within conventional limits) in very much the fashion he chooses. But there is another category of village ritual in which, for all but the untouchable castes at least, the services of a Brahman priest are indispensable. The chief rites in this category are the rites of passage or *sanskaras* which mark the critical points in the social and physical life process of the individual. Five main *sanskaras* are observed by hill villagers nowadays. These are the naming ceremony performed shortly after birth (the exact interval depends on the caste of the parents of the child), the first hair-cutting ceremony (for boys only), the investiture with the sacred thread (for boys of the "twice-born" castes only, and usually merged with the wedding ceremonies nowadays), the marriage ceremony, and the funeral rites performed at and shortly, after death (again the interval depends on the caste of the deceased person). Besides the *sanskaras* there are some other ceremonies which require the offices of a Brahman priest, the chief being the public scripture recitals known as *kathas* which are fairly frequently held as acts of piety by the villagers; here the priest is needed not only to actually recite and expound the ancient scriptural tales but also to conduct the preliminary worship to the gods which the sponsor of the *katha* must perform before it is to begin. There are other occasional rites and ceremonies which also fall into this category but it is unnecessary to describe these in detail as the pattern of ritual I shall now describe is common to them all.

On all these occasions the ceremonial includes the recitation of "mantras" from the Hindu scriptures which are in Sanskrit. These are known only to the Brahman priest who also knows the correct ritual gestures and acts which should accompany them. The indi-

vidual rites of worship I have already described can be performed at any time and virtually any place at the discretion of the worshipper and do not as a rule form part of any wider ritual complex. The religious rites performed at weddings, funerals, kathas and the like are somewhat different. They are not generally conducted without regard to time; the naming ceremony must be performed a certain number of days after the birth of the infant, and the first hair-cutting ceremony only during certain years or months in the child's life. The crucial rites of the wedding ceremony can take place only at the exact hour decided upon by the priests as auspicious for the couple concerned. Moreover the religious ritual on such occasions generally forms only one element in a whole sequence of activities which may well—as in the case of a wedding—last several days. Apart from the ritual performed by the priest there may also be ceremonies of a non-religious nature, such as the presentation of gifts to kinsmen and retainers at marriages, or there may be religious "folk" rituals for which the priest's offices are unnecessary, such as the ritual visit to all the chief shrines in the groom's village after the bride's first arrival at her conjugal home. There are often numerous other secular activities such as the feasting of caste brethren at funerals and weddings which are felt to be as indispensable to the occasion as the scriptural rites I shall describe here. But in spite of these important differences I believe that as far as the ritual use of images is concerned a common idiom can be detected in both the private worship of individuals and the priestly worship at sanskaras and other public occasions.

It is neither necessary nor possible to describe the details of each ceremony here; I shall only attempt to outline the "style" and pattern of ritual common to all rites in the category I am concerned with here, illustrating especially the role of the image. In all these rites there are at least two chief actors, i.e. the priest and the member or members of the household on whose behalf or at whose behest the rites are being carried out (the bride and groom in the case of the marriage ceremony, the chief mourner at a funeral, the male head of the household at a katha). The usual pattern of events is as follows, and anyone who has observed Vedic ritual in any part of India will be familiar with it. The priest first prepares the site at which the ritual is to take place; this site—generally a square of floor-space in the house or courtyard of the family concerned—has first been purified by a fresh application of cowdung by the womenfolk. Even if (as is usually the case) this site has no previous sanctity it is now regarded as "pure" and sacred by all; shoes are removed in its vicinity and no impure substance is allowed near it. Shortly before the rites are due to begin the priest, who has also purified himself by bathing, approaches this sacred area and on it arranges the various items and instruments needed for the ceremony—the rice, flowers, water and other substances which will be used as offerings, the sacred "kusha" grass which is tied round the fingers of the sacrificer etc. The chief preparation however which the priest must make is the construction of a sacred diagram on the ground. This consists of what looks like an intricate pattern executed in white flour. Its different elements actually represent the deities or sacred objects (such as the nine planets and the four elements) which will be invoked and to which offerings will be made in the ensuing ceremony. The deities are not shown in a strictly representational form. Usually each deity or group of deities is indicated by an appropriate symbol. Thus Ganesh is represented by the auspicious swastika, the goddess Durga by the "trisul" (trident) which she wields, and the four Vedas by a square divided into four equal sections.

At the commencement of the ceremony the principal participant, also having bathed and donned fresh clothes, seats himself before the sacred diagram with the priest sitting to



one side of him. As the priest recites the appropriate mantras calling on the different deities his client performs the ritual gestures, which chiefly consist of the salutation of and presentation of offerings to the deities mentioned in the mantras which the priest is reciting. The sacrificer offers water, flowers, rice, red "tika" and other items at the appropriate moments to the figures or symbols on the diagram which represent the gods. This he does under the direction of the priest, for the Sanskrit mantras are incomprehensible to the unlettered villager and he depends on the priest who (although in all probability no Sanskrit scholar himself) does know the meaning of the sacred mantras in his repertory to tell him what he must do at each stage of the rite. When the correct offering has been made to each element in the diagram, any other necessary ritual actions performed, and all the mantras completed, the sacrificer and the crowd of witnesses who usually gather at such occasions rise and disperse. The priest replaces all the instruments used (such as the metal spoon with which offerings of water are sprinkled, and the texts containing the mantras he has recited) in the special bag in which they are kept. At some point either the priest or the sacrificer will take the items offered and throw them into a nearby stream or pool, the purpose of this being to prevent them from coming into contact with any kind of impurity.

I cannot here discuss the complex cultural and historical processes (which in any case remain largely unknown) which have produced these two main "styles" of ritual behaviour in the village—the private ritual performed for the gods by individuals and the Sanskrit rites conducted by the priest. However it is my opinion that the general ideas concerning images and their uses which are implied in both these forms of worship are similar enough to justify their being treated together. The ultimate purposes of a Sanskrit ceremony are of course far more complex than those which underlie a simple act of individual worship. The "purpose" of the funeral ceremonies could be said to include the ensuring of peace to the dead man's soul, the protection of the living, the public demonstration of filial ties, and so on—whilst an individual rite of worship will generally have a single ultimate purpose which is very clearly defined in the mind of the worshipper, i.e., to obtain a particular boon from the deity approached. But the immediate and manifest end of either type of ceremony is the propitiation of the divine powers through sacrificial offerings. In the case of private rites it is nearly always food which is offered before (or "to") an image or symbol; in the case of the Sanskrit rites "pure" offerings of flowers, rice or fruit are more commonly made and the different elements in the priest's diagram on the ground form the focus of the ritual. But the function of the tangible cult object—whether an image, a symbol, part of a shrine or a figure drawn in flour on the ground—is essentially similar. The cult object acts as the intermediary through which men's sacrificial worship is directed to the gods. It acts as the point at which the holy world of the devatas and the world of ordinary human beings, with their everyday needs and aspirations, intersect. It mediates between the devotee and the deity he seeks to please by providing a focus for his cultic attentions and providing a physical locus of sanctity at which (or towards which) he can perform the physical act of sacrifice with its super-physical significance.

The role of the image is thus purely instrumental, and as Alain Daniélou has pointed out it "has no value once it has fulfilled its purpose."<sup>3</sup> As soon as they cease to act as points of communication between the divine and the human—that is, when they are no longer required for ritual purposes—images tend to lose their religious significance and become mere objects, admired and valued objects perhaps, but objects nonetheless. In the case of the Sanskrit ritual the sacred diagram is not even preserved once the ritual is

finished. Although the offerings and the instruments used in the ritual are, even after the ceremony, treated so as to preserve their purity, the image itself becomes an object of indifference; the rites completed, the priest scrapes up the remaining traces of flour and the area of ground which was so carefully purified and on which the diagram was so precisely drawn becomes once more a mere patch of floor space. People pass to and fro over it no longer making sure to remove their shoes in its neighbourhood, and its religious significance is lost.

Similarly the image of a deity or a shrine which is no longer regularly used, though treated with a certain respect, loses its essential sanctity. For instance, there were in the village I studied several small disused shrines of neglected and decrepit appearance which had long since lost their effective sanctity and were no longer treated with special reverence. The shrines in active use also often appeared somewhat decayed and in need of repair but they were distinguished by the reverent air maintained by villagers in their vicinity and the fact that no-one would ever approach them wearing shoes or indeed bringing any other article made of leather (which is always regarded as an impure substance). One shrine had been dismantled recently and rebuilt on more grandiose lines at the expense of a Brahman family, who had also provided new images to furnish the handsome new edifice. The various discarded images from the old shrine were removed and set up against the wall of a nearby house. The chief image (depicting the deified ancestor of the Brahman families of the village to whom the shrine was dedicated) was kept in the house of the family who had rebuilt the shrine. But being no longer the object of any cult it was not treated as having any special sanctity and was produced readily and without ceremony when I asked if I might remove it to the courtyard to make a drawing of it. It was treated as a valuable and interesting object, but its sanctity had evidently not survived its active use. One might say that it was treated in much the same manner as the image of a Hindu deity might be treated by a trained curator in an occidental museum.

The tangible cult object is thus sacred by virtue of being used as a focus for worship, and the acknowledgement of its sanctity is shown in the preparations which the worshipper makes before using it; so long as it fulfils the role of sacred intermediary it must be approached for ritual purposes only by those who have undergone some kind of preliminary purification, and in no case by a person who for any reason is in a state of more than usual impurity (such as members of the "untouchable" castes in the case of a shrine or image used by "caste" Hindus, or a menstruating woman). In the case of some Sanskrit rites the purificatory process may be the subject of some ceremony itself, such as when the bride and groom are purified before the wedding rites begin. Both are given a ritual bath by the women of their respective households and their bodies are rubbed with turmeric. They cannot approach the wedding booth where the priests have laid out the sacred diagrams and where the crucial rites uniting them will take place until this purification has been completed.

It is distinctive of the popular forms of Hinduism that the image has virtually no religious use beyond the ritual of the kinds which I have described here. For instance, the image is not normally used by the peasant as a focus for meditation; its function is not primarily to "remind" the devotee of some aspect of the divine, although it may do this as well. The primary function of the image, as I hope I have shown, is in ritual. It is the ritual which converts it from a profane to a sacred object and as such it is regarded in a fairly literal fashion. That is, villagers do not identify the god permanently with its image but for

the purpose of the ritual there is a sense in which the image *is* the deity it depicts. It does not merely make the devotee think of the deity which he addresses but actually represents that deity by "receiving" the offering made to it.

## Summary

The image or the locus of sanctity acts as the intermediary between the worshipper and the divine being which is external to himself. The *devata* which the image represents is regarded as a distinct being, a personality separate from the devotee and with whom communication is necessary, just as it is necessary between human beings who enter into relationships with each other. The image functions as the focus for ritual activity to which the sacrifice can be presented in a physical act. It is never, I repeat, mistaken for the divine being itself; people will speak of a picture of Durga as if it embodied Durga herself or of Shiva's lingam as if it were indeed Shiva, but they are not in fact so naive as to equate the symbol with what is symbolized.

God (Bhagwan) is not conceived as having His being external to man or indeed to any part of creation. Immanent in everything, He is within men as in other things. There can thus be no need for any intermediary ritual to communicate with God, and consequently any image would be superfluous as well as impossible to fashion, for who can depict the unviewable? God can be reached by unuttered prayer—indeed He knows what is in men's minds before they make such silent supplication. *Devatas* may also be spontaneously addressed in this way but this kind of prayer will normally accompany and not replace the ritual proceedings I have described. The chief idea behind the ritual worship of the gods is not merely to address them and beseech them, but actively to please and propitiate them in order to gain their practical help. To this end the ritual of sacrifice is necessary.

The image and its use on the part of Hindu peasants represents an awareness of a phase of the divine which is external to man, whilst the non-ritualized devotions to God represent awareness of the immanent and transcendent phase of the divine. There is thus the maximum of consistency between the ways in which the different modes of worship correspond to the different modes of regarding the divine principle.

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<sup>1</sup> The above references to the fact that most of the peasants were unlettered must not be read in any derogatory sense; this fact had to be mentioned, however, as having a certain bearing on the mentality of the people in question and on their way of viewing things which differs from the habitual conceptualism of a typical Western mind today.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Daniélou, *Hindu Polytheism*. Routledge and Kogan Paul, 1964, p. 4

<sup>3</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 364