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Gilles Tarabout

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## Visualizing the Gods

Gilles Tarabout (CNRS)

*in memory of Shri L.S.Rajagopalan*

**/p.16/**



**Fig.1**

Figuration is not necessarily divine power. On this decorated plank, borne on elephants during processions at festival time, the figuration of the Goddess is not the seat of the divine power, which is located instead in a consecrated metal mirror at the bottom of the frame. Kunissheri, Kerala, 1994 (G. Tarabout)

**/p.17/**

### Looking at the images of Gods and Goddesses

From the profusion of Gods and Goddesses that ornate temples down to the posters and small idols that may be used at the family level, divine images are everywhere in India. Considering the various supports and styles through time – stone sculpture, metal casting,

wood carving, clay modeling, frescoes, miniatures, *mandala* ground paintings with powders, scroll paintings, palm leaves engravings, modern paper prints - there is a variety and a multiplicity that may have no equivalent elsewhere. Art books and iconographical studies have widely made known the diversity of the iconic aspects of the divine, so that it is common, at least outside India, to imagine that worshippers are always addressing such physical images. Though important works have studied more abstract representations of the divine world, such as the aniconic *Shivalinga* (a phallus-like stone on which is invoked the presence of God Shiva) or geometric *mandalas*, the general impression prevails that Hinduism is a religion in which devotees interact with Gods and Goddesses figured along anthropomorphic lines.

Indeed, the visual interaction of devotees with divine images in temples is a main component of worship. In Diana Eck's words<sup>1</sup>, "The central act of Hindu worship, from the point of view of the lay person, is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity. [...] Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine." The relationship between the Gods and their figuration is diverse and complex in India. Briefly stated, though many devotees consider images to be mere symbols of a higher, formless divine reality, there is an overwhelming perception that a divine power actually is in the idol if consecrated properly. At the time of its installation, the eyes of the idol are ritually opened so that the deity may see its devotees – this is deemed to be a very powerful gaze. The exchange of sights between devotees and the visible God, at the time of worship, is called *darshan*, auspicious vision. One may have the *darshan* of a God or of a saint. It entails approaching them with respect, bringing them offerings: by seeing them with humility, and be seen by them, one gets their blessings.

Coming for obtaining the *darshan* of a God or a Goddess is certainly one of the main motivations for the frequentation of temples. It is fully accomplished when the divine image is anthropomorphic, with eyes looking at the beholder. Indeed, the possibility of such a sight is given so much importance that some aniconic supports, like *Shivalingas*, may be endowed with engraved eyes or decorated with clothes so that it may take an anthropomorphic resemblance.

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<sup>1</sup> ECK, Diana, 1985, *Darsan. Seeing the Divine Image in India* (2<sup>nd</sup> Revised and Enlarged ed.), Chambersburg, Anima Books (p.3).



2.

Facing the Goddess Kali, Sree Kali Chattan Seva Madham, Kerala (G.Tarabout, 1994)

/p.18/

### Images and worship

This powerful effect of iconography is such that images of Gods, without ever being ritually consecrated, may provoke by themselves reactions of popular worship. A story goes that once in a Kerala temple, the painting of God Narasimha (the human-lion form of Vishnu) made on an outside wall for embellishment purpose began receiving offerings from “illiterate” people of the locality. But offerings and rituals are never without effects, and Narasimha, so it is said, really began residing in his image with various effects in the surroundings; a proper consecration had to be organized in order to ritually contain the divine power. In a similar way, it is not uncommon to see divine figures which were not initially meant to be worshipped, becoming the object of popular devotion, even in archaeological sites.

Many anecdotes tell also about devotees praying to cinema images of Gods, treating a print out of Mona Lisa as if it were of a Goddess, or transforming through sheer devotion a mere mango seed into a support for a God. When they apply to images, even the most naive rituals are able to bring Gods among humans. The effect is multiplied by the increased facility that printed posters now offer for displaying and worshipping images of Gods everywhere.

It may then come as a paradox that this proliferation of divine images, and the power that is ascribed to them, gives but a limited idea of the ways Gods are thought to be present among humans. Actually, as everyone in India might observe, a lot of divine presences are not at all represented by an anthropomorphic image endowed with eyes. There is the ubiquitous camphor flame, or the oil lamp, where the god of Fire, Agni, dwells, and which may manifest the presence of any God or Goddess. There are all the *lingas* (phallus-like stone, but in fact any pebble might be treated as a *linga*), not only for God Shiva but also for other deities,

including Goddesses and ancestors as well. There are innumerable gods and goddesses who are worshipped with no other figurative traits than their support in trees, on bare platforms, on powder designs made on the ground, on raw stones, on mirrors, on tridents, swords and other weapons, etc.



3.  
God Bhairava as guardian deity at the entrance of the Shri Santadurga temple, Goa (G.Tarabout, 1994)

/p.19/



4.  
Metal masks are temporarily fixed on aniconic supports in order to give an anthropomorphic aspect of the Gods for their *darshan* during festival time, Madankovil, Thiruvananthapuram (G.Tarabout, 1999)

In a festival witnessed in southern Kerala in 1982, it took some time to understand that the stool, the coconut placed on it, and the sword on its side, to which offerings were offered, were a tangible outdoor figuration of the main deity of the place, Goddess Bhadrakali. Far from being exceptional, this practice is rather the rule for manifesting the divine in the shrines of the region. Another example: in a temple in central Travancore, Goddess Bhagavati, the

main deity, is figured by an anthropomorphic statue in stone in the sanctum; her warrior aspect, Bhadrakali, 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 (another anthropomorphic figure of the divine) wearing these consecrated objects; Bhadrakali is also asked to reside in temporary colour *mandalas* drawn by specialists at festival times; other deities and divinized ancestors reside in small shrines in the temple compound, one god figured by a trident, the others by pebbles; at a distance, in the midst of the paddy fields, a “cock-mound” is the place where, once a year, agricultural labourers used to sacrifice cocks to their own deities figured by packs of stones; on the border of the paddy fields, a tree inhabited by a female ghost, a Yakshi, received a yearly sacrifice. There is thus a combination, and a hierarchy, of registries for marking the presence of deities, which is typical of what can be observed in the majority of Kerala temples and more largely in India. While the main deities of a temple may present a fully developed iconography and be figured in many forms, other deities may reside in only one support without an anthropomorphic image; and subordinate beings and ghosts may be thought to reside on bare platforms or in uncut stones, or said to hover invisibly in the atmosphere of the place.

From a quantitative point of view, it is thus arguably the case that, in their immense majority, the cults to the Gods and Goddesses in India are devoid of anthropomorphic images: instead, they rely on interactions with aniconic supports or implements, and imply beings that are not represented except in mind and words. This will appear less paradoxical in the light of the variety of visualisation processes that may connect /p.20/ human beings and the divine realms. Besides *darshan*, there are at least two other ones: *drishti*, evil vision, the unfavourable sight of invisible beings; and *dhyana*, the mental contemplation of Gods or Goddesses by ritual experts.

### ***Drishti*, the evil vision**

Some evil effects caused by meeting with some beings are specifically called *drishti* in astrology for explaining various troubles. Texts have their own lists: the *Prasna Marga*, “The path for questions”, a XVIIth century sanskrit treatise composed in Kerala and used in some parts of South India, enumerates for instance 26 categories of invisible beings put under the generic name of *bhutas*, whose sight may affect their victim. It differs from the “evil eye” (with which it is sometimes confused), an ill-defined malefic influence brought often unwillingly by some people. *Drishti* may be compared to the evil effect (*dishtiya*) resulting from the sight of some entities in Buddhist Sri Lanka, and which has been described by scholars as spirit possession - as is also the case in India. This disruptive potential of visual interaction is attributed by David Scott<sup>2</sup> to “a distinctive cultural poetics of eye-sight”, which

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<sup>2</sup> SCOTT, David, 1991, “The Cultural Poetics of Eyesight in Sri Lanka: Composure, Vulnerability, and the Sinhala Concept of Distiya”, *Dialectical Anthropology*, 16 (p.85).

would apply to India as well, as *drishti* is evoked in astrological and medical manuscripts throughout the country.

The cure varies for these afflictions. When the invisible beings responsible for *drishti* cannot be placated, rituals will try to expel them far away, or to literally nail them in a place from where they won't be able to escape. However, most of these beings are of an ambivalent nature. Some of the nameless *bhutas* present in the air may be satisfied with a little food left for them or with grain thrown in the air. Many, properly "seated" and worshipped on an altar or in a shrine, may turn into protective powers. But there is no special need for figuring them. Any physical mark, any support may suffice: what is important is to stop their wandering and honour them in a place, even if a temporary one at festival times.

Placating such entities may entail deep changes in the way they are considered. For instance Yakshis are among the categories that may inflict *drishti*. They are well known in Kerala where they are commonly identified with the ghosts of young women who died an untimely death, and imagined as beautiful damsels wandering at night who may seduce a traveller and then transform themselves into terrifying ogresses and devour him. They usually reside in some tree, and may be placated by offerings placed at its foot. They may also be invoked by magicians in crude drawings that will work as charms.

However Yakshis may play a more important role in some temples. In parts of former Travancore, a festival called *patayani*, "army for war", is centred on successive masked dances representing various beings of the Goddess army; some of these beings are Yakshis. Among them, one is called the Antara Yakshi, the "inner Yakshi", and is invoked in a song<sup>3</sup>:

"Antara Yakshi, the Illusion (*maya*) of Shiva,  
Oh beautiful enchantress!  
To receive the worship (*puja*) to your holy feet,  
/p.21/ Come to the canop and rest, oh Devi![...]  
Oh one with divine feet you should put an end to the affliction and vacate!  
In the spathe of arecanut, roasted and powdered items  
Are spread, and fire brands are fixed all along;  
I am cutting the cock and giving the blood offering (*guruti*).  
Cast off hesitation, become pleased, and appear bright!  
Vacating the affliction, on the mask (*kolam*)  
Come in a lovely manner and stay!  
Dance, and shake, and get exhausted, and play!  
You must dance beautifully and quit and go away!"

The Yakshi is asked to leave the people afflicted by her and to come on a mask and exhaust herself in dancing: she is temporarily neutralised but her dangerous potential is intact,

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<sup>3</sup> VASUDEVANPILLAI, Kadamanitta, 1993, *Padeni (An Introduction to Padeni – An Art Form of Central Travancore)*, Thiruvananthapuram, The State, Institute of Languages (p.330). Translated from the Malayalam by L.S.Rajagopalan.

and she is eventually asked to leave the place. Not all Yakshis will be dispatched in this way, and some may become permanent protective powers. This is the case in the very temple from where the above song comes, where a permanent shrine is dedicated to a Yakshi, figured by a pebble, who acts as guardian of the main deity. In other temples, she may enter the iconography as a submitted ogress bearing on her shoulders Bhadrakali. Eventually, in some places, she may get considered as a full-fledged /p.22/ Goddess, Yakshiamma, with her own iconography, installed in a temple where devotees come to get her *darshan*. Here, iconographic developments closely follow the registry of religious practice observed in different contexts for the “same” being.



5.

Creative meditation : controlled respiration as part of the worship with *mantras* and *dhyana* of a Goddess (figured by the sword); offerings in each square of the diagram are meant for various deities. Festival of God Ulakudaya Tampuran, Itappazhanji, Thiruvananthapuram (G.Tarabout, 1994).

### ***Dhyana*, inner contemplation**

A very different visual relationship is involved in *dhyana*, the inner contemplation of the divine realized by concentrating one’s mind on specific Gods or Goddesses as described in authoritative verses, the *dhyana shlokas*. This practice is crucial to the installation of a new idol in a temple, and the mental image has usually (but not always) close connections with the external iconographic features found in physical figurations. *Dhyana* is also regularly involved by ritual experts when they need to call a given deity on an aniconic support: in that case there is no physical figuration actually seen by devotees, though the cult itself was made possible by the initial visualization process. The ritual activity relying on *dhyana* is thus a creative one, installing the presence of a deity through the active inner visualisation of a specialist.

This is not unlike the more general practice of chanting *mantras*, verbal and sound formulas that are deemed to possess extreme potency: the proper repetition of a *mantra* (*mantrajapa*) is able to make present a deity, and in esoteric speculations *mantras* and their

sound components are themselves deities –there are countless ones. Here is for instance a verse used for evoking Goddess Vaishnavi<sup>4</sup>:

“Black like clouds, with attractive dress, riding the bird Garuda, holding in the right hands the holy discus, the head of the Asura, trident and sword, and in the left hands the bowl, conch, bell, and club, I contemplate on the Vaishnavi Devi! [...]”

In such cases, the expert commands to some extent the coming of the deity. This power is exemplified by tales of magicians acquiring the control of deities. The aspiring magician retreats and performs austerities, reciting the *mantra* of the chosen deity in endless repetitions while he is immersed in inner contemplation (*mantrajapadhyana*). The success comes when the deity makes itself fully visible to the magician: the latter will then be able to install the deity in a shrine and call it whenever needed: he has gained control over it (*devatasiddhi*). This is how a Kerala magician explains the process<sup>5</sup>:

“If a person is prepared to concentrate his mind and thoughts with single-minded devotion on the goddess Yakshini, and meditates while chanting the *Yakshini-mantra* the prescribed number of times, Yakshini will definitely manifest before him. She will further execute whatever the devotee commands. [...] Similarly, there is *Chattan seva*. *Chattan seva* means pleasing God Chattan and thereby getting control over him. Strict austerities for a period of about 2 to 3 *mandalams* [one *mandalam* is a period of 41 days] are to be observed to win the favours of Chattan. As a result of the chanting of *mantras* with the attendant rituals, one will achieve a state of inner purity. This purity will be perceivable only to the five sensory organs of the person concerned. Others cannot have any idea about it. Chattan actually manifests before the person who wins his favour. He can see Chattan when his mind is concentrated in meditation.”

/p.23/

The same conception is brought out in a poetic way in a song dedicated to Chattan. It tells how an ascetic, Konnan, first acquired the vision and the control of the God before installing him in his family temple (here called *matham*), where Chattan is still nowadays worshipped. Chattan submits Konnan to various trials and is satisfied by the steadfastness of his austerities<sup>6</sup>:

“Gold crowned Mayattan [the Illusion, or Maya, another name for Chattan]  
Observed all this,

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<sup>4</sup> *Mahasaram*, 1951, edited with an Introduction by M.K.Vaidyar, Madras, Government Oriental Manuscripts Library (p.193, verse 161). Translated from the Sankrit by L.S.Rajagopalan.

<sup>5</sup> Interview K.N.B. Ashan, October 3, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> KRISHNAN KOCCUMON, Ayyankolpatti, 1985, *Bhagavan cattan svamiyute rupakkalam pattu (torram pattu)*, Cannanore, Sini Printers (p.31-32). Translated from the Malayalam by L.S.Rajagopalan.

And went straight  
Near the sage Konnan.  
Like a dear little mirror in front of the sage,  
Appeared Maya!  
At the merest call, at the snap of the fingers,  
Appeared Maya!  
Maya took the hand  
Of the grandfather Konnan, head of the *maṭham*.  
'All the boons that you want,  
Tell me, my son!'  
Hearing this, standing with folded hands,  
The grandfather Konnan said:  
'As the family deity in the house of Kanati,  
May you dwell, oh Mayattan! [...]  
The rituals required for Mayattan,  
I shall give.  
And all the children after me,  
Will do that which is required by Mayattan,  
Dance and songs, and the daily rituals,  
And we shall make you dwell!'  
Mayattan took the hand  
Of Konnan, head of the *maṭham*.  
Gold crowned Mayattan  
Made himself appear inside the palm of the hand. [...]  
The grandfather, head of the *maṭham*,  
In the shrine of the *maṭham* installed  
Gold crowned Mayattan!"

## Conclusion

It is clear from the above examples that ritual practice and what Scott called the « poetics of eyesight », this power residing in the sight, are closely entangled. Adequate ritual is the ordering principle of such a power. With the exception of divinely “self-born” images (*svayambhu*), generally stones deemed to be a spontaneous manifestation of a God (often Shiva) and to be thus full of divine power, only rites performed by a specialist are deemed to empower the effigy in a controlled way. Moreover, when a renovation of the temple is necessary, the divine power in the effigy is temporarily /p.24/



6.

Images and supports are the object of actions. Here, traces of vows made to God Serpents, Minakshi temple, Madurai (G.Tarabout, 1999)



7.

Visible absence: the third altar, on the right, was used for a God later deemed to be evil; he was ritually expelled, and his altar was scrapped of any trace of his former cult. Shri Kalamnkoli Chattan Seva Matham, Kerala (G.Tarabout, 1994).

/p.25/ transferred by ritual means to a consecrated pot (*kalasham*), and back into the idol once the work is finished. Ritual thus articulates different registries of the God's visibility and iconic representation. It can also do more.

The visible aspect of a God is not necessarily an image, and may be a mere support that enables the worshipper to manipulate it and do required ritual actions. Sometimes, the existence of a deity is made visible to the onlooker merely through the very presence of offerings. Besides, many supports are temporary such as the *mandalas* drawn on the ground and swept as part of the overall ceremony. In Kerala, this sweeping of powder images is highly ritualized, often done with a flower of the arecanut tree or, in the case of possessed women installed on it (as in the cult of serpent-deities), with their loosened hair; the powder itself, imbued of divine power, may sometimes be distributed among devotees as a divine blessing (*prasad*). Ritual is everywhere in such a process: for elaborating the image in the first place, as well as for wiping it off without sustaining damage, or for transferring its substance to devotees as a blessing.

Eventually, it is ritual that defines which is the divine identity present in an image. In a Kerala temple, the same idol is used for the successive presence and worship of three different aspects of the Goddess. Elsewhere, an astrologer recommended that rituals to Goddess Rajarajeshvari should be performed instead of the ones formerly done for Goddess Kamakshi,

without changing the idol. In the Himalayas, some effigies with the iconographical traits of the Sun God are used for Goddess worship, etc. The fact is general in India, and suggests that the relationship between iconography and rituals is not always an easy one: there may be some tension, if not contradiction, between the two. However, they usually reinforce each other for rendering present a deity, or, conversely, for removing any possibility of an unwanted being coming back: this happened when a God was discovered to be evil - so it is said - and his place of worship was literally scrapped off so that the resulting emptied spot became the visual manifestation of the God's disgrace and absence.