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Hindu Mandir and Deity Worship- The Manifestation of Divinity: Idols and the Ideal

The Bollywood movie I was watching reached its climax, and the hero of the movie, a brave soldier, is shown dramatically saluting the Indian flag as the enemy troops shoot at him. This particular scene made me think, why does the hero salute the flag? It is a mere piece of cloth, right? It struck me that the man wasn't saluting the cloth, but the idea behind the cloth, his country. A flag symbolizes a person's homeland which is why people venerate it. In the same way, the idols at a Hindu Mandir are representations of a much more prodigious truth, the supreme Lord himself.

Hinduism is mostly known as a religion that focuses on idolatry. Outsiders to the religion assume that Hindus worship rock idols with four hands and bizarre markings, but what many people don't know is that when Hindus go to the temple they don't worship the stone figure itself, but the concept behind the figure. The idol is merely a manifestation of the concept in a form that is comprehensible to man. As the great saint Swami Chinmayananda eloquently put it, "Idols are to remind the devotees of the ideal, the Supreme. Since the human mind cannot conceive of a formless Supreme, God is conceived of in the form as represented by an idol." In this way, worshipping the thousand deities we see at the temple does not mean that we believe in one thousand Gods, there is only one God but several forms present. It is a lot more difficult for the untrained human mind to concentrate on worshipping a ubiquitous, eternal and formless concept than it is to meditate upon the lord in the beautiful form of Sri Krishna.

This simple limitation of the human mind is what makes deity worship the heart of Hinduism. The need for us to constantly perceive using our senses makes it a lot harder to meditate upon a formless and abstract God. In fact, Lord Sri Krishna himself states in the fifth verse of chapter twelve of The Bhagavad Geeta that "It is hard for someone who is still attached to the physical world to comprehend the unmanifested, impersonal feature of the Supreme..."

We may wonder how to reach the state when we can meditate on the formless Supreme, and Lord Krishna deftly answers that question as well, he says in verse six that “Those who meditate upon me, upon my form and think constantly only of me can unite the individual consciousness with the supreme consciousness and will attain salvation away from this world of material existence” In other words, God is encouraging devotees to use deity worship as a medium to reach the eternal and he urges his devotees to concentrate on his form as a deity. The Lord himself has given solid proof that deities are manifestations of the divine, but only if people pray with complete devotion and not superficial desires.

The clanging of bells, overlapping with the euphonious chanting of the priest and the sweet smell of incense conveys a familiar mental image to many Hindus. At the Mandir we are received by a splendid display of a myriad of deities embellished with glistening ornaments and clothes. Every idol, even the ones at the smallest temples, are adorned by devote priests and venerated to the highest degree. As Hindus, we go to the temple as a place of worship, whenever there is an occasion in the household be it a birthday or a funeral, it is a requirement to go to the Mandir. But if the Lord is omnipresent and formless, why is there even a need for a temple? The answer is because it is a place where we can focus completely on the beautiful deities before us, it is where we can be free of distractions and take part in activities that bring us closer to the lord. Shri Krishna enlightened us about the benefits of deity worship, and what better place to do it than the peaceful environment of the temple? In fact, Swami Sivananda, another renowned spiritual master, said that “The precincts of the temple are so sacred and give a peace which no other atmosphere can give, there is a divine vibration in the entire area by the constant and regular pooja...,the recitation of the holy Vedas and chanting of specific mantras throughout the year..The entire atmosphere elevates the soul of man to a very great degree.” Therefore the Hindu Mandir is a home to those who are ready to surrender themselves to the beautiful image of God, whether that God is in the form of Lord Krishna, Lord Ganesha or Lord Siva.

As a Hindu myself, many of my friends have asked me why we worship idols and I never used to be able to answer their questions, but I now know that behind every idol and every deity, behind every ritual and every offering there is an ideal, a greater truth. There is a God who is the same whether a Christian a Muslim or a Hindu man is praying to him and I know that the deities which are so valuable to Hindus are the inexplicably important manifestations of the

unmanifested, they have the wondrous power to fill our hearts with devotion and love for the Lord. The idols which stand at the heart of the Hindu temple are not mere stone figures but symbols of the Supreme and realizing that one fact is the real essence of any religion.

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