

## Hindu Mandir and Deity Worship - The Manifestation of Divinity

मनो तो गंगा माँ है, नहीं तो पानी. What scientists and geographers have branded as one of the dirtiest rivers in the world is the same sacred river that Hindus have revered as a link between themselves, and complete purity. One drop of *Ganga jal* can purify anything and everything. One person may see filth, where it may be ashes of noble ancestors in the eyes of another. Millions of Hindus start their day with a bath in these waters, accompanied by the blessings of their ancestors. However, their spiritual journey is not to the banks of the Ganga River. Their rituals are merely a gateway to communion with the supreme power, *Brahman*. This is the mystical charm of Hinduism. We do not pray to the idol, but through it, to a power we have kindled by the strength of our faith and beliefs.

At first, idol worship was not always so prevalent. Since the beginning of Hinduism, the foundation has been *Sanatan Dharma*, or an all-pervading truth; God is an infinite power, or *shakti*, and also our ultimate goal. How Hindus worship has two forms, *saakaar swaroop*, and *nirakaar swaroop*. Akaar means form, therefore *saakaar swaroop* means having physical form, or idol worship, and *nirakaar swaroop* means being intangible, and formless. The mental discipline of sages in the Vedic time was beyond compare. They had the ability to grasp the immaterial power of God, and worshiped Him in *nirakaar swaroop*, a power they could not see or touch. As times changed and humans evolved, our mental capacity diluted. We did not have the discipline to focus on something that did not physically exist. Subsequently, during the period that the *Puranas* were written, Hinduism introduced a new means of worship: *sakaar swaroop*, presently known as idol worship. Within the *Puranas* are descriptions of our gods and goddesses, which define the images of our deities today. This created a stepping stone, so the common Hindu could first worship the idol, then realize that God resides within himself, and then ultimately become one with *Brahman*; from worshipping God in *sakaar swaroop*, to *nirakaar swaroop*. Nevertheless, practicing Hindus of today do not always concern themselves with these technicalities and terminology. Instead, it simplified to, there is one God, and we pray to various incarnations of God.

Since then, God became a term whose definition is unique to everyone. Grasping an intangible and invisible force that has various interpretations is impossible for average humans without a focal point for devotion. Swami Vivekananda explained this concept brilliantly in his speech at the World Parliament of Religion in Chicago on September 19th, 1983, “As we find that somehow or other, by the laws of our mental constitution, we have to associate our ideas of infinity with the image of the blue sky, or of the sea... The Hindus have associated the ideas of holiness, purity, truth, omnipresence, and such other ideas with different images and forms.” Hinduism differs from other religions though, in that our idols, books, and rituals are supports to help us progress in our attempt to attain *Brahman*. As Swami Vivekananda said, “...the whole religion of the Hindu is centered in realization. Man is to become divine by realizing the divine.” To do so, we breathe life into these stone structures to make them elegant *murtis*. At the

beginning of every pooja, the *avaahan*, or invocation, is to instill God temporarily in an idol. It is essential to understand that this power does not come out of thin air. The power or the God is within us is, and brought out into something we can touch, and direct our energy to. Just like the value of a simple piece of paper changes depending on what is written on it, the transformation of a common stone to a treasured idol lies in the eyes of the beholder. A Hindu does not adorn a statue with flowers, but with the power of his beliefs and faith, prays to a supreme *shakti* beyond the statue.

Modern scientists may not entirely understand the core principles of Hinduism, such as the existence of an omnipresent power, but as Swami Vivekananda said, "Hindu religion does not consist in struggles and attempts to believe a certain doctrine or dogma, but in realizing not in believing, but in being and becoming." Worship in Hinduism is an individual's journey to become one with God. However, the rich background of our religion only provides stepping stones to direct this endeavor. Faith is our strong foundation which has the power to change running water into *Ganga Maa*, food into *Prasad*, and lifeless statues into our manifestations of divinity.

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