PERFORMING PŪJĀ IN HINDUISM. THE ACHIEVEMENT OF IDENTITY BETWEEN GOD AND WORSHIPER

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Abstract. Pūjā is the act of showing reverence to a God. Performing Pūjā entails acknowledging the divine with the purpose of achieving identity between God and worshiper. Pūjā means reverence, honour, adoration, or worship. It is a fundamental religious ritual that Hindus perform on a variety of occasions to pray or show respect to their chosen Gods or Goddesses. For Hindus, whether it is performed at home or in a Temple, Pūjā is a way of meeting a deity and showing Him/Her admiration. The ritual of Pūjā always works as a sacrament to change and broaden human nature. Through this ritual the devotee discovers “the original counterparts on the impersonal levels receiving thus the key to ritualize his/her lower (mundane) life in guidance by the higher principles”. Thus through Pūjā one can be part of life’s circles.

Keywords: Hinduism, Pūjā, temple, religion, adoration, cultural background, philosophy, mythology, identity, worshiper.

Every religion is a way to God. No way to God is superior to the other. However, depending on one’s mental temperament and cultural background, one way might be better suited to him/her than another. This difference arises due to the difference in the temperament of the person and cannot be used to judge the general efficacy of a path.

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, “Religion is the Eternal Relationship between the Eternal Soul and the Eternal God”. In India, religion is an integral part of the entire Indian tradition. For most of the Indians, religion permeates every aspect of life, from common-place daily chores to education and politics. Secular India is home to Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and other innumerable religious traditions.

Hinduism is the dominant faith, practiced by over 80% of the population. Beyond this statistic, Hinduism is often seen as a culture, or a way of life. The term Hinduism, itself, was coined by the Greeks. The river Sindhu, the western boundary of India, which flows

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1 Article written as a result of a research at Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, and at The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, India, in January–February 2008.
3 Swami Vivekananda, 1863–1902, the first Hindu monk from India to teaches Vedanta in USA, addressed the World’s Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the World’s Columbian Exposition (1893). Vivekananda left a body of philosophical works. Also, he had composed many songs including his favorite Kali the Mother.
into the Arabian Sea, was known to the ancient Persians as “Hindu”. The Greeks borrowed the terms and changed it to “Indos”, later to become for English speakers “Indus”. The Hindus prefer to call their religion as the Sanātana Dharma, the Eternal Religion, because it is based upon the eternal principles of the Vaidika Dharma, the teachings of the Vedas. The Vedas are not ascribable to human authorship, according to some schools of Indian philosophy, and therefore they are considered eternal (nitya), without beginning (anādi).

Hinduism says that there is one God. Just as a man is called “father” by this son, “husband” by his wife, “son” by this father, and so on, God is called by various names and worshiped in various forms depending on the mood and approach of the devotee. When God is worshiped to remove hurdles, He is worshiped as Ganesha. When God is worshiped to bless with good understanding of art and science, She is worshiped as Sarasvati, and so on. Similarly, when a devotee wants to worship God as mother, She may be worshiped as Kālī. When a devotee wants to worship God as a child, He may be worshiped as Gopal. If a devotee wants to worship God as the formless, without attributes, the transcendent being, one may worship It as Brahman. These are all to suit the various temperaments of the devotees. By all these various forms and names, the devotee very well knows that he is worshipping only one God. And every path to God is true. Everyone has to choose a path to God according to one’s own temperament.

Most Hindus believe in an immense unifying force that governs all existence and cannot be completely known by humanity. Individual Gods and Goddesses are personifications of this cosmic force. In practice, each Hindu worships those few deities that he or she believes directly influence his or her life.

Hinduism can be approached in many ways. One can study sacred texts, their obscurities and wisdom; or focus on the exquisite and often startling developments in Hindu art and iconography; or seek to distil core beliefs out of the dazzling variety of everyday religious practice.

“[…] the Hindu is a peculiar person. He does everything in a religious manner. He eats religiously; he sleeps religiously; he rises in the morning religiously, he does good things religiously; and he also does bad things religiously.”

“A Hindu… is… [one] who feels attachments to the land that extends from Sindhu to Sindhu [sea] as the land of his forefathers – as his Fatherland; who inherits the

blood of the great race… which[,] assimilating all that was incorporated and ennobling all that was assimilated[,] has grown into and come to be known as the Hindu people; and who, as a consequence of the foregoing attributes, has inherited and claims as his own… the Hindu civilization, as represented in a common history, common heroes, a common literature, a common art, a common law and a common jurisprudence, common fairs and festivals, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments.”

Religion, in its three aspects – philosophy, mythology and ritual – deals with questions of life, the existence of God, nature of beings, creation, goal of life, and means of attaining to God. Through mythology, ostensibly with a historical basis, human beings tried to explain some phenomenon of nature, the origin of life, customs, religious rites of a people, involving the exploits of gods and heroes.

There are a few basic themes in Hindu beliefs: Dharma (ethics/duties), Samsāra (the continuing cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth), Karma (action and subsequent reaction), Moksha (liberation from Samsāra), and the various Yogas (paths or practices).

Seeing (Sanskrit, darśan) the deity is considered to play an important part in the identification of the worshiper with the divine. It engages the viewer in a powerful relationship with the sacred. It is believed that the deity reciprocates in the visual engagement. The image seems to be the very medium in which belief takes place.

Bhakti, often translated as devotion, is derived from the Sanskrit bhaj, to share in, to belong to, to worship. The devotee is thus expecting to share, and belong, and to participate to the divine. Bhakti is expressed through Pūjā.

From ancient times, Hinduism has known two pre-eminent methods of approaching divinity in ritual:

“(1) the method of Yajña, which conveys offerings to a distant god by consigning them to an intermediary fire, and (2) the method of Pūjā, which extends offerings to a present divinity by placing them before, or applying them to, the God’s symbol or image.”

Yajña, offerings made by priests in Temple fires, seem to derive from Vedic (Aryan) sources. Pūjā almost certainly has Dravidian roots.

Pūjā is the act of showing reverence to a God, a spirit, or another aspect of the divine through invocations, prayers, songs, and rituals. An essential part of Pūjā for the Hindu

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devotee is making a spiritual connection with the divine. Most often that contact is facilitated through an object: an element of nature, a sculpture, a vessel, a painting, or a print.

“Frequently, there is a deafening and even discordant sound of music of pipes and drums combine with ringing bells and the chanting of sacred texts. Scented smoke pours from the burning incense and camphor, and the heavy perfume of sandalwood, jasmine, and roses hangs in the air.”

The ritual works as a sacrament to change and broaden human nature. Through the ritual and worship a devotee discovers

“The original counterparts on the impersonal levels receiving thus the key to ritualize his/her lower (mundane) life in guidance by the higher principles. For his/her every thought and emotion one finds a source in the universe. For every personal requirement she/he finds an impersonal solution. Gradually the lower, mundane, will assume the form of the Gurus, and the Seers. Through the Pūjā the divinity is invoked. In its workings the ritual is a mystery play or a drama to be enacted by human beings. The whole creation is understood as a mystery play enacted by God. Every devotee can invoke the presence of any God provided his/her memory about himself/herself is sacrificed during the ritual. Such an attitude is described as devotion and self-surrender and is necessary for the identification of the worshiper with the worshiped deity.”

“Scholarly opinion is divided regarding the origins and etymology of the word Pūjā. Many scholars have argued that Pūjā was initially a Dravidian practice native to India and point to the sharp distinction traditionally drawn between Pūjā and yaşña, the refusal of the strictest Vedic priests to participate in Pūjā, the long-standing prevalence of Pūjā in village cults, and the long role of low-caste (and hence non-Aryan) hereditary priests in village Pūjās. But no clear-cut Dravidian derivation has been established for the term Pūjā; the best-known attempt at a Dravidian etymology is that of Jarl Charpentier (1927), who proposed to derive Pūjā from Tamil Pūcu or Kannada Pūsu, «to smear», a reference to the applications of sandalwood, turmeric, or vermilion pastes that are common in Pūjā offerings.”

Pūjā, in Sanskrit, means reverence, honour, adoration, or worship. Pūjā is a religious ritual that Hindus perform on a variety of occasions to pray or show respect to their chosen Gods or Goddesses. The offerings are made with an acknowledgement – “I dedicate to you, O, God, what is truly yours.” The whole Pūjā is thus an acknowledgement of one’s smallness and humility.

8 E. Krishnamacharya, op. cit., p. 27.
Performing *Pūjā* in Hinduism

*Pūjās* vary in their scale, which depends on their duration, the number of deities being honoured, and whether it is being performed by and for public or private benefit. Most practicing Hindus perform *Pūjās* once or twice a day. *Pūjā* should be done after a shower or bath and it is recommended that rites be performed before food intake to ensure *sattvic* qualities and full concentration (*dhyana*). *Pūjā* is also performed on special occasions in addition to the daily ritual.

Most Hindus maintain a home shrine for one or several divinities honoured within the household. This home shrine is located in a small, separate room of the house that is set aside solely for worship. The shrine itself consist of pictures or statues of gods set up on a table or low platform, or images may be housed in a wooden shrine-cabinet, whose doors are opened only during the service. The room is very clean and a perfume of sandalwood or jasmine hangs in the air. There are flowers everywhere and candles.

*Pūjā* can be divided into the following steps: Invocation, Offering, Prayer, Conclusion and Immersion. Also, *Pūjā* performed at home or at Temple may incorporate all or several of sixteen traditional *upacāras*, “attendances”. Their number depends of the believer. In fact, a full *Pūjā* of sixteen *upacāras* is in effect a miniaturized Temple ritual; the daily worship, or *nitya Pūjā*, in a major Temple differs from it principally in scale and in the number of times that the *Pūjā* is repeated (three to six times daily for the Temple ritual).

All sixteen *upacāras* are:

1. Āvahāna (“invocation”). The God is invited to be present at the ceremony.
2. Āsana. The God is offered a seat.
3. Svāgata (“greeting”). The worshiper asks the God if the journey has gone well.
4. Pāḍya. The worshiper symbolically washes the God’s feet.
5. Arghya. Water is extended so that the God may clean his or her face and teeth.
6. Ācāmaṇīya. Water is offered for sipping.
7. Madhuparka. The God is offered the water-and-honey drink.
8. Snāna. Water is offered for symbolic bathing; if submersible, the image may literally be bathed and then towelled dry.
9. Vastra (“clothing”). Here a cloth may be wrapped around the image and ornaments affixed to it.
10. Anulepana or gandha. Perfumes and/or ointments are applied to the image.
11. Puṣpa. Flowers are laid before the image, or garlands are draped around it.
12. Dhūpa. Incense is burned before the image.
13. Dīpa or ārati. A burning lamp is waved in front of the God.
14. Naivedya or prasāḍa. Foods such as cooked rice, fruit, clarified butter, sugar, and betel leaf are offered.
15. Namaskāra or pranāma. The worshiper and family bow or prostrate themselves before the image to offer homage.
16. Visarjana or udvāsana. The God is dismissed.”

At the Temple, where the Gods are believed to dwell as royalty, Pūjā is usually performed at sunrise, noon, sunset, and midnight. A Hindu Temple is believed to be the earthly seat of a deity and the place where the deity waits for its devotees. Temple structures are sacred spaces where Gods partake of human offerings and in which the people can be with the Gods. Deities are often considered kings.

Hindu Temples are normally dedicated to one God. Before entering in a Hindu temple, one should remove one’s shoes, in order to pay respect to the God within the Temple. Also, one should wash the hands and leave outside the Temple all problems. The meeting with God is the most important thing in the believer’s life. The objects are created as paths to God.

As Swami Vivekananda once said,

“It is in love that religion exists and not in ceremony, in the pure and sincere love in the heart. Unless a man is pure in body and mind, his coming into a temple and worshipping Śiva is useless. The prayers of those that are pure in the mind and body will be answered by Śiva, and those that are impure and yet try to teach religion to others will fail in the end. External worship is only a symbol of internal worship; but internal worship and purity are the real things. Without them, external worship would be of no avail. Therefore you must all try to remember this.”

The Hindu festivals and the observance of the sacred days, with their double aspects of vratas and utsava, are designed for the purpose of achieving the metamorphosis of human beings from the mundane to the divine.

Vrata (Sanskrit “to choose”), used so as to mean “religious vow”, indicates a set of rules and discipline, mental and physical, that the devotee undertakes in order to please a deity and secure something. The vrata is usually followed by the utsava (Sanskrit “to cause to go upward”), usually naming a “festival”, the occasion of celebration and ending of the vrata.

The worship of God as Śakti, the feminine principle, is both nitya (compulsory) and kāmya (optional). It may be performed for nine days or just three days in the form of Durgā Pūjā.

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10 Nancy Auer Falk, Pūjā: Hindu Pūjā, op. cit., p. 7494. See also C. J. Fuller, Hindu Worship, in India’s Religions. Perspectives from Sociology and History, op. cit., p. 117.
In West Bengal, Bihar and Assam, the most important Pūjā is dedicated to Goddess Durgā. It is one of the oldest Hindu festivals whose origin lies in antiquity. In the Veda it was called the śaradiyotsava or the Autumnal Festival. Every year, Durgā Pūjā is celebrated from the sixth to tenth day of the waxing moon in the month of Ashvin, which is the sixth month in the Bengali calendar. Occasionally however, due to shifts in the lunar cycle relative to the solar months, it may also be held in the following month, Kartik. In the Gregorian calendar, these dates correspond to the months of September/October. Durgā Pūjā is performed and it basically involves making offerings to Goddess and the worshippers tries to secure the Goddess’ blessings.

The Durgā Pūjā Festival is a “car festival”, in which the moveable image is mounted on a large cart and pulled through the town on a set processional bath. The devotee can see the God; He or She may toss flowers, break coconuts, or sprinkle the image with water as the cart progresses.

In Sanskrit the word Durgā means “She who is incomprehensible or difficult to reach”. She is the mother of the Universe and worshipped for her terrifying aspect. She is also known for her many other names like Pārvatī, Ambika, and Kālī. The Pūjās are held over a ten-day period, which is traditionally viewed as the coming of the married daughter, Durgā, to her father, Himavat’s (the Himālaya’s) home. It is the most important festival in Bengal, and Bengalis celebrate with new clothes and other gifts, which are worn on the evenings when the family goes out to see the pandals (temporary Temples set up to venerate the Goddess). Although it is a Hindu festival, religion takes a backseat on these days: Durgā Pūjā in Bengal is a carnival, where people from all backgrounds, regardless of their religious beliefs, participate and enjoy themselves.

The Durgā Pūjā festival starts with “giving of the eyes”. The eyes of the Durgā’s clay image are painted on Mahālaya or the first day of the Pūjās. The 15 days of the dark fortnight of the month Bhādrapada (September-October) are called Mahālayapakṣa. The first day of the new-moon is Mahālaya Amāvāsyā, and is the day of the painting of the Goddess’ eyes. The artisans fast for a day and eat only vegetarian food. The entire process of creation of the idols from the collection of clay to the ornamentation is a holy process, accompanied by rites and other rituals. The clay for the idols is collected from the banks of a river, preferably from the Ganges.

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12 Swami Harshananda, *Hindu Festivals and Sacred Days*, 3d ed., Bangalore: Ramakrishna Math,
The Durgā Pūjā begins with waking her up. The ceremony of waking her up, bodhana, consists in placing a ghata, a pot, with water containing sandalwood paste, dūrva grass (Panicum Dactylon), leaves of five trees such as mango, clay from seven place, fruits from under a bilva tree (Aegle Marmelos), the mantras of awakening are uttered, and the bilva tree itself is worshiped as Durgā. Next morning, a small branch of the bilva tree is cut out, placed in the second ghata and carried to the place where Durgā’s earthen image is placed for worship and kept at her feet. After pranapratishtaya a detailed worship is done to the ghata with sixteen upacaras, followed by homa, sacrifice in a consecrated fire. The myth says that Durgā (or Pārvatī) came to her mother’s house from her husband place, and reaches there very late at night. Not willing to disturb her parents she spent the whole night under a bilva tree near the house. The ritual follows thus the myth.

The Pūjās done on the eight and the ninth day are almost identical with that of the sixth day. On all these days, bath is given to the sword or the mirror kept in front of Durgā’s image. Every day the Devāmāhātmyam is recited at the place of worship. This recitation is considered to confer great benefits on the performer of the Pūjā.

On the early morning of daśamī, the tenth day, the visarjana pūjā is performed, worship signifying a sending away of Durgā to her heavenly abode. It is the moment when the deity is withdrawn from its earthen image to ones own heart. In the evening, after the ārati (in which light from wicks soaked in ghee, purified butter, or camphor is offered to the deity) Durgā’s image is carried in a grand procession and immersed in a river. After the immersion people celebrate meeting family members and friends.

Devī, the Goddess, or Mahādevī, the great Goddess, Mahāmāyā, the great illusion, is the wife of the God Śiva and daughter of Himavat, i.e. the Himālaya mountains. She is mentioned in the Māhābhārata under a variety of names, with several of her peculiar characteristics. As the Śakti of Śiva she has two characters, one mild, and the other fierce. When she is in the latter she is especially worshiped. Devāmāhātmyam is the textbook of the worshipers of Devī and celebrates her victories over asuras or demons. Different names she receives: Durgā, “the inaccessible”, when she receives the messengers of the asuras; Daśabhuja, “ten-armed”, when she destroys part of their army; when she fought with the asura general, Raktabija; Mahishamardinī, “destroyer of Mahisha”, an asura in

the form of a buffalo\textsuperscript{13}.

“It is not until the early centuries of the Christian era, however, that either Durgā in particular or the Goddess as a unitary concept became important figures in Hindu religious texts. Hymns in praise of Durgā as the Goddess appear in the Virātaparvan (6) and the Bhīshmaparvan (23) of the epic Mahābhārata, the critical edition of which considers them to be late interpolations. The three hymns provide lists of her names and forms and praises of her greatness, but they do not narrate her mythological exploits. These appear in great detail in the classical texts known as the Purānas, dated between the third and fifteenth centuries CE.”\textsuperscript{14}

The Devīmāhātmyam, part of Mārkaṇdeya Purāṇa, contains thirteen cantos (LXXXI-XCIII) speaking about Durgā. The 700 mantras are dealing with three different aspects of the Goddess: Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī, and Mahāsarasvatī.

This text celebrates the Goddess’s victory over the buffalo demon Mahīshāsura and over the demons. The great prevalence of Durgā’s buffalo-killer form, known as Mahīshāmardinī, in iconography shows this to be her most important exploit. The Devīmāhātmyam tells how the Gods are oppressed for a century by the demons led by Mahīshāsura. Finally they appeal to the great Gods Vishnu and Śiva to rescue them. The anger of Vishnu and Śiva, joined with the anger of all the other Gods, produces a mass of luminous energy. This then takes the form of a woman, the Goddess. Each God gives her his principal weapon. The God Himavat gives her the lion, which becomes her “vehicle”. During a great battle she destroys the armies of Mahīshāsura and finally beheads the demon himself.

Who is this Goddess, Durgā Devī, Mahādevī, Mahāmāyā, whom millions of people worship? What is her form?

“If you this universe is born, by you this world is created. By you it is protected, O, Devī, and you always consume it at the end. O, you who are of the form of the whole world, at the time of creation you are of the form of the creative force, at the time of sustentation you are of the form of the protective power, and at the time of the destruction of the world, you are of the form of the destructive power. You are supreme knowledge as well as the great nescience, the great intellect and contemplation as also the great delusion, the great Devī as also the great Asūrī.

You are the primordial cause of everything, bringing into force the three qualities. You are the dark night of periodic dissolution. You are the great night of final dissolution, and the terrible night of delusion. You are the Goddess of good fortune, the ruler, and modesty, intelligence characterized by knowledge, bashfulness, nourishment, contentment, tranquillity and forbearance. Armed with sword, spear, club, discus, conch, bow, slings and iron mace, you are terrible and at the same time you are


pleasing, you are more pleasing than all the pleasing things and exceedingly beautiful. You are indeed the supreme Isvara, beyond the high and low.

And whatever or wherever a thing exists, real or unreal, whatever power all that possesses is yourself. O, you who are the soul of everything, how can I extol you? By you, even he, who creates, sustains and devours the world, is put to sleep. Who is capable of extolling you? Who is capable of praising you, who have made all of us?“¹⁵

Practitioners of Hinduism seem to have kept alive the beliefs of the Golden Age, or the Age of the Devas. The highest type of intuition, the cosmic consciousness working through human beings, was and still is a belief that did not leave people’s minds. The unity between the individual self and the universal Self embodied or not, is the cord that binds together the mythical time with our present time. Even the qualified-dualistic systems tend towards identification with the divinity. The whole of Creation is a God’s play and human beings perform their part. The bhakti (devotional) movement, usually expressed through Pâjâs, continues to nourish much of the Indian piety today.

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