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The Hindu Trinity Myth

How temples can publicize their philosophy and lineage to counteract the misconception that Hinduism is polytheistic

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A few years ago a non-hindu professor who teaches world religions at a Texas University visited our monastery to learn more about Hinduism. His first question was, "Is it true that Hindus worship a trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva? That is what the textbooks teach. That is what the professors tell their students." Though I was aware of the wide scope of this misconception, I was aghast to see it taken as fact.

We explained to him that this idea is based on stories from the Puranas, but it has no relevance in actual Hindu practice or theology. Some texts seek to draw

credence for this idea from the massive trimurti (three-faced) stone carving of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara as one being in the Elephanta Caves (ca 700). However, a more sensible view is that this 16-foot-tall carving is a paradigm of the oneness of Divinity. One might even surmise that the Elephanta image was carved to glorify the famous Vedic verse (Maitri Upanishad 5.2): "That part of Him which is characterized by tamas is called Rudra. That part of Him which belongs to rajas is Brahma. That part of Him which belongs to sattva is Vishnu." Is this a prayer to a trinity of three Gods? No. It is a prayer of adoration to the One Supreme Lord.

The professor was truly amazed to hear this, having never actually spoken to a Hindu about it before. He thanked us for the clarification and pledged to change his syllabus for the coming year to state that Hindus actually worship a one Supreme Being and are not polytheists. Unfortunately, most teachers of world religions continue to indoctrinate students with the misunderstanding that Hindus are polytheistic. Hindus were never polytheistic in the sense that there are many equal Gods. Henotheism (literally "one God"), which philosophers also call inclusive monotheism, better defines the lofty Hindu view. It means the worship of one God without denying the existence of other Gods.

Whether there is one or more Supreme Gods can be traced to two distinct but intertwining streams of Hindu thought and tradition. There is the original Vedic-Agamic Hinduism, with its high-minded philosophical edicts, its vast knowledge about ritual and theology and a wealth of mystical insights into God, man and world. And there is the more recent Puranic Hinduism, with its folk narratives and myths, its teachings of culture and religious practices, its vast record of history, architecture, medicine and geography and, of course, the popular and sometimes implausible stories about the Gods. Vedic-Agamic Hinduism is ancient, for the authoritative Vedas and Agamas have their source deep in human history, 6,000 to 8,000 years ago, while Puranic Hinduism is more recent and based on secondary scripture.

Another source of confusion in this regard is the Hindu temple itself, when not properly explained. We walk in the door and encounter a multiplicity of shrines, each with a different Deity. How does the onlooker reconcile the one Supreme God of the Upanishads with the profusion of Gods we encounter in the temple? This final section of the Vedas states that God is the Supreme Reality referred to as Brahman, transcendent and immanent, one and indivisible, infinite and eternal, all-pervading, Existence-Knowledge-Bliss - as well as the Personal Lord.

This is where the knowledge of Hinduism's four denominations or sectarian traditions is quite helpful. The Tamil Lexicon by the University of Madras defines them as follows: "Saivism: The religion which regards Siva as the Supreme Being and is exclusively devoted to His worship, of sixteen sects. Shaktam: The religion which enjoins the exclusive worship of Shakti as the Supreme Being. Vaishnavam: The religion which holds Vishnu to be the Supreme Being." The definition for the Smarta or Vaidika Sampradaya is found under Shanmatam: "The six Vedic religious systems: Saivism, Vaishnavam, Shaktam, Ganapatiya, Kaumaram, Sauram." In other words, Smartas have a choice to worship any one of the six Deities - Siva, Vishnu, Shakti, Ganesha, Subramanya and Surya - as the Supreme Lord, as their Ishta Devata, or preferred Deity.

However, we don't want to leave the impression that all Hindu denominations hold the Smarta viewpoint that all Gods are "aspects" of the Supreme Being. In Saivism, for example, God Siva is the Supreme Being and Ganesha and Subramanya are separate Gods who assist Him. These Gods are not symbolic representations, but real spiritual beings, somewhat akin to the archangels of Christianity.

A uniquely confusing situation we find in the West is that Supreme God Vishnu and Supreme God Siva are sometimes equally enshrined side-by-side in the same temple to accommodate various allegiances. This gives the wrongful impression that the practicing Hindu worships more than one Supreme God. This problem does not occur in India, where only one Deity is enshrined as the central God in any temple.

Indeed, we know of US temples which on their website describe Siva as the destroyer and Vishnu as the preserver. Of course, this is not how knowledgeable Saivites or Vaishnavites look at it. To Saivites, Siva is the entire Supreme Being, not merely the dispenser of destruction. To Vaishnavites, Vishnu is the entire Supreme Being, not just the Lord of preservation. That we worship the Supreme Being above all others is clearly the view of Hinduism's revealed scriptures (shruti), the Vedas and Agamas.

Not all Hindus are familiar with the category of scripture called the Agamas. The Agamas were part of an oral tradition of unknown antiquity which some experts consider as ancient as the earliest Vedas. The Agamas are the primary source and authority for temple construction and ceremonies. Each of the major denominations - Saivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism - has its unique Agama texts. Smartas

recognize the Agamas, but don't necessarily adhere to them, relying mainly on the smriti texts, such as the Dharma Shastras, Puranas, Mahabharata and Ramayana.

In the Saiva Agamas, for example, Lord Siva is described as the Supreme Being, performing all three divine actions of creation, preservation and destruction. Quite often two additional actions are included: His veiling and revealing graces. The Raurava Agama states, "The birth of the world, its maintenance, its destruction, the soul's obscuration and liberation are the five acts of His dance." No wonder Saivites take great exception to the statement that Siva is the God of Destruction, a concept that finds its source in the Puranas.

I have been to a number of temples that have equal shrines for Venkatesvara and Siva. If such a temple took the Puranic approach, it would say that at the Sri Venkatesvara shrine we are worshiping Vishnu, the God of Preservation, and at the Sri Sivalingam shrine we are worshiping Siva, the God of Destruction. In the Agamic approach, we would say the Venkatesvara shrine is of the Vaishnava denomination of Hinduism, which worships the Supreme Being as Vishnu. The liturgy, or temple ritual, is conducted according to the Pancharatra or Vaikhanasa Agama. The Sri Sivalingam shrine is of the Saiva denomination of Hinduism, which worships the Supreme Being as Siva. The liturgy is conducted according to the Kamika and Karana Agamas.

The misunderstanding created by the Puranas is not a new problem. Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879) was a devout and brilliant Saivite working to reeducate the Saiva community of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, following the departure of the Portuguese and two centuries of foreign domination and anti-Hindu preaching. The Christians were criticizing Hinduism as superstitious, childish and polytheistic, quoting from the Puranas to prove their point. Navalar boldly defended his faith, even translating the Bible into Tamil to show its own failings and immaturities. The missionaries loved the Puranic tales which speak ("absurdly," Navalar declared) about the marriages of the Gods and promote a multiplicity of Supreme Gods.

Navalar believed in the Gods, the Mahadevas, and worshiped Lord Murugan devoutly. But he knew his faith spoke of a single Supreme Being and wanted his fellow Saivites, who were languishing under missionary assaults, to understand the traditional view. He spoke against the storybook aspects of the Puranas, making it clear to Saivites that the Agamas are spiritually superior and should be the source of their faith and practice. Still, he defended the greatness of the Kanda Purana,

which he saw as high-minded and inspiring. He succeeded in bringing Saivism back to life by showing his people the true, mystical purity of Hinduism.

The point that Arumuga Navalar was making is: don't take the Puranic stories literally. They are a major source of misconceptions about Hinduism. When the Puranas are taken as the authority on Hinduism, the high philosophy of the revealed scriptures is obscured and confusions arise.

For temples in the West, the Vedic-Agamic approach is what is needed to create clarity about Hindu temple worship in the minds of Hindu youth, as well as the non-Hindu community. We are encouraging all temples to help create this clarity of Hindu belief by stressing on their websites and in their publications that, first and foremost, Hindus all worship a one Supreme Being, though by different names and through different traditions.

We also suggest that temples share more information on their traditions, such as: 1) Mata: whether the liturgy is of the Vaishnava, Saiva, Shakta or Vaidika tradition; 2) Agama: the name of the Agama (or other scripture) that governs the ceremonies; 3) Murti: the form of the main Deity and a brief history of its worship in India; 4) Archaka: the background of the priesthood; 5) Darshana: the philosophy or philosophies taught at the temple; 6) Anubhuti: any divine experience, dream, vision or inspiration that led to temple's creation. For such a description for our own Kadavul Hindu Temple go to www.himalayanacademy.com/ssc/hawaii/kadavul/.

There is no reason for Hindus to endure the criticism of polytheism when we have the glorious Vedas and Agamas to guide the way and offer wisdom about our worship of the one Supreme God. Hopefully this article will help Hindus respond to misconceptions they may encounter.