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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

A Note on the Worship of Idols in India

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I

As is well known, "Idolatry" has always more or less been a part of the Hindu religion.¹ There is, however, considerable divergence in the accounts on the nature of its prevalence, though not its vogue,² even if we confine ourselves to the medieval period of Indian history and the modern period which followed it. For instance, Al-bīrūnī remarks, preparatory to his comments on Hindu idolatry:

Since, however, here we have to explain the system and the theories of the Hindus on the subject, we shall now mention their ludicrous views; but we declare at once that they are held only by the common uneducated people. For those who march on the path of liberation or those who study philosophy and theology, and who desire abstract truth which they called *sāra*, are entirely free from worshipping anything but God alone, and would never dream of worshipping an image manufactured to represent him.³

It is clear, however, that even the educated people carried on the worship of images and that it was popular even among the Brahmins as is testified by Bernier during his travels through the Moghul Empire.⁴ Similarly while Al-bīrūnī's remarks above seem to indicate that there were two classes of Hindus—the uneducated idolators and the educated non-idolators—Dārā Shukōh, in the Moghul period, speaks of the worship and non-worship of images as representing two *stages* of spiritual growth and not two classes of people as such. For

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¹ Ainslee T. Embree, *The Hindu Tradition* (New York: The Modern Library, 1966), p. 119. Benjamin Walker, *The Hindu World*, Vol. I (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p. 468.

² William Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 7 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1914), p. 142 ff.

³ Edward C. Sachau, *Alberuni's India* (Delhi: S. Chand and Co. 1964), pp. 112-3.

⁴ See K. M. Sen, *Hinduism* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 35.

“Dirā Shukōh ascribes to Hindu idolatry a positive role in the development of the religious consciousness: the idols are indispensable for those who are not yet aware of the inner (*bātin*) meaning of religion and need therefore a concrete representation of the deity: as soon as they come to know the *bātin*, they dispense with the idols.”⁵

The purpose of this paper is to indicate that from amidst all the mass of information on Hindu idolatry available around the 17th to the 19th centuries at least one useful distinction can be detected.

II

This is the distinction between an image and an idol; between the representation being consciously recognised as representing a deity and the recognition that it is the deity rather than a representation thereof. In this connection a three-hundred-year-old conversation between the seventeenth century French traveller Francois Bernier and some Hindu pandits of Banaras is perhaps worth quoting... Bernier was shocked by the ritualism and image-worship of popular Hinduism and asked the pandits how they could tolerate such things. The pandits said in reply :

We have indeed in our temples a great variety of images... To all these images we pay great honour; prostrating our bodies, and presenting to them, with much ceremony, flowers, rice, scented oil, saffron, and other similar articles. Yet we do not believe that these statues are themselves Brahma or Vishnu; but merely their images and representations. We show them deference only for the sake of the deity whom they represent, and when we pray it is not to the statue, but to that deity. Images are admitted in our temples, because we conceive that prayers are offered up with more devotion when there is something before the eyes that fixes the mind; but in fact we acknowledge that God alone is absolute, that He only is the omnipotent Lord.⁶

It is not without interest that a couple of centuries later, another French traveller, Abbé J.A. Dubois, during his peregrinations in the South in the early parts of the eighteenth century, should make these observations on Hindu idolatry :

The idolatry of India, which is of a much grosser kind, has for the object of its worship the material substance itself.⁷

⁵ Yohanan Friedman, “Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions,” *The Journal of American Oriental Society*, Vol. 95, No. 2 (April-June 1975), p. 217.

⁶ K. M. Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

⁷ This makes Al-Bīrūnī’s comment somewhat puzzling that “The Hindus honour their idols on account of those who erected them, not on account of the

It is to water, to fire, to the most common household implements; in a word, to everything which they understand to be useful or hurtful, that the Hindus pay direct worship.

It is true that they admit another kind of idolatry which is a little more refined. There are images of deities of the first rank which are exposed to public veneration only after a Brahmin has invoked and incorporated in them their actual divinities. In these cases, it is really the divinity that resides in the idol, and not the idol itself, that is worshipped.

But the one kind of worship does not exclude the other; and that which has for its object the actual substance is the most common.⁸

III

Abbé J. A. Dubois' concluding remark about non-discrimination between what we have called idol-worship and image-worship may account for the fact that the explanation of the pandits of Banarās did not convince Bernier,⁹ nor perhaps Dubois himself.¹⁰ It should be noted, however, that both recognised the fact that in the act of temple worship or "public veneration" the "idol" was really to be considered an "image."¹¹

material of which they are made. We have already mentioned that the idol of Multan was made of wood. E.g. The *linga* which Rama erected when he had finished the war with the demons was of sand, which he had heaped up with his own hand" (*op. cit.*, p. 121).

⁸ Abbé J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), p. 548.

⁹ K. M. Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, Part III, Chapter I.

¹¹ See Kenneth W. Morgan, *The Religion of the Hindus* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1953), pp. 79-80.