

O W E W I K S T R Ö M

***Darsan* (to See) Lord Shiva in Varanasi**

Visual Processes and the Representation of God by Seven Ricksha-Drivers

Introduction

In spite of its effort to be transculturally relevant, the psychology of religion is quite ethno- or rather Western-centric. This becomes very clear when one tries to "translate" Indian folk religiosity into concepts taken from mainline theories; i.e. social, cognitive or psychoanalytical psychology of religion. Not only do the norms and values differ, but the very ontological assumptions underlying the categories in which the researcher understand differs fundamentally from the internal Hindu anthropological and epistemological apriori. For example, their words of the psyche include contextuality, from time to space, to ethics to groups. The subtle interrelatedness of the divine, spiritual and the mundane is obvious (Geertz 1973). It includes the flows and exchanges of substances within and between persons with minimal outer boundaries.

The psychological makeup of persons in societies so civilizationally different as India is embedded in fundamentally distinct principles of these cultures and the social patterns and child rearing that these principles shape (Marsella et al 1985). Therefore it is clear that a western scholar and an Indian devotee are quite different, not only simply that they see things differently, coming from varied cultures, but that the very inner emotional-cognitive makeup is culturally constructed in different ways (Roland 1989). Of course this will "disturb" the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, the scholar and the pious man. In order to understand the psychological dynamics in folk religiosity, I think that the researcher has to re-examine and be aware of the way he uses the theoretical models in cross-cultural psychological hermeneutics. In the context of this conference on art and religion I would like to discuss the role of the visual and behavioural dimensions of the Indian religiosity which in my opinion has not so

far been taken seriously enough in the psychology of religion (Devereux 1978).

There are profound intrinsic interrelationships between the cultural conceptualizations of human nature, the psychological makeup of the individual and the nature of interpersonal relationships in a given culture (Hallowell 1955; Spiro 1965). The western impregnated concepts “self”, “identity”, “belief” or “faith” as scholarly terms for the religious man must in an Indian context be replaced or at least supplemented by other terms, words that can do justice to the social, ritual and perceptual processes behind the experienced reality character of Lord Shiva. In order to understand the reciprocal and dynamic relation between the believer and the god, a researcher has to take into consideration the role of visual perception and movements inside the sacred ritual room (Eck 1985). To actually stand in front of a site or inside a temple in order to *see* and to *be seen* by the blessing face of the deity or a symbol for the deity is an integrated part of the worship. From a psychological point of view the Sanskrit term *Darsán* (to see and to be seen) is of interest.

Darsán Lord Shiva in Banares

This paper is based upon six weeks’ observations and interviews with riksha-drivers of Banaras, who regularly came to the small *Kashi Kedaratem-pel* close to the Ganges to “take Darsán” of Lord Shiva and other deities (Eck 1983; Katz 1993). I will limit this paper to just one aspect of their religious behaviour — the way they visually interacted with a symbol of Shiva, during working hours by stopping for a few minutes outside small sites in town and in the evening in the temple.

Outside the Pradeep Hotel, in central Banaras, I met ten riksha-drivers who allowed me to follow them to their daily *puja*, to observe and interview them about their religion. Out of them I chose to follow more closely those seven drivers who regularly visited the Ganges in the evenings. All of the drivers were living in or just outside Banaras, all had families and were married. They had from two to six children. Five of them spoke good English. A translator, a student from the Department of Psychology at Benares Hindu University (BHU), joined the project. The interviews were undertaken during the day — where I could follow one or two — and in the evenings in relation to the *arati*, where I could observe and talk to them collectively. I took a lot of notes. They were written down later and presented to the drivers so they could complete or change the interviews. (In a full

report I will give more space to methodological questions, hermeneutic perspectives and empirical findings.)

The Kashikedara temple in the southern sector of the city of Banaras is called Kedara Khanda. It is a river temple sitting on the top of an impressing ghat high above the water's edge on a long hill. From the river the temple is distinguished by its vertical red and white stripes, which indicate the South Indian hand by the temple's management, and by the many morning bathers. After bathing in the Ganges, people climb the broad steps into the riverside door of the temple, carrying the brass pots of Ganges water which they will offer in the worship of Kedareshvara. There are a lot of Shiva lingams outside and on the threshold of the temple. Inside it is a dark interior court. Around it there is a multitude of tiny shrines, most of them to Shiva lingas. Guarded by Shiva's bull Nandi is the *sanctum sanctorum*. The Linga of Kedara contained within this dark chamber is not an ordinary linga but rather a lumpish outcrop of rock with a white line through it. According to the tradition, this was not established by human hands, but was an unusual, "self manifest" appearance of Lord Shiva. To this very temple my drivers came regularly, every afternoon for 20–25 minutes' puja. They brought flowers, water and butter and from the temple priest they recieved their *tika*.

According to my informants, the main reason to visit the temple was "to take" Darsán. The same concept was used for the small glance they made at a site or a *Nandi* or a *Lingam* waiting for a customer or after the midday rest. A common theme for my informants was the importance of seeing the images of the deity regularly and very concretely— either Krishna, Durga, Visnu or Sarasvati as paintings or statues — present close to the sanctum of the temple. The central part of their ritual therefore was to stand in the presence of the god and to behold the image with their own eyes, not only to look, but above all to be observed. Psychologically speaking, this seemed to be an opportunity for the driver to be confirmed as a religious individual and thereby to strengthen his *spiritual identity*. This identity is not related to customers, friends, family roles linked to the social status of their society, but to a reality that transcended ordinary life — very often the object of reverence was Lord Shiva, the god of Varanasi and especially of Kashi Kedara temple.

Through their eyes they gain the blessings of the divine and that blessing followed them, but was also reinforced in their daily life. When the drivers stopped working, waiting outside the hotels or the centre when they bought some flowers or poured some waters on Shiva lingam, they went to take darsan (Janaki 1990).

But seeing the Lord is not initiated by the worshipper. Rather, the deity presents itself to be seen in his image as a sacred perception. The prominence of the interaction of man and god through the eyes instead of through the ears, as in western traditions like Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Hindu deities, also reminds us of the reciprocal character of this experience. It is not only the worshipper who sees the deity; the deity sees the worshipper as well. For example, the gaze which falls from the newly opened eyes of the statue of a deity is said to be so powerful that it must first fall upon some pleasing offering, such as sweets, or upon a mirror where it may see its own reflection. The gaze is filled with power.

The experiential part of this Darsán indicates clearly that "seeing through the eyes" has not only perceptive but also cognitive and tactile dimensions. Darsán is described both as a form of touching as well as a form of knowing because God is eminently visible. Thus, it is a sensuous piety. One touches the image of the deity with one's hand (*sparsa*) and one also touches the limbs of one's own body in order to establish the presence of various deities (*nyasa*). One hears the sacred sounds of the mantra (*sravana*).

In the ritual the drivers have the gestures of humility, bowing, kneeling, prostration, and also touching the feet of the statues or of the holy men. They utilize the whole range of intimate and ordinary domestic acts, which are simple but important, cooking, serving food, dressing, undressing, perfumes, putting on. It is not only an attitude of honour but also an attitude of affection in the range of ritual acts and gestures utilized in the treatment of the image — either the statue or the lingam. In that way this is a kind of empirical theology.

It was common in puja offer flowers and water, to take *prasad*, to get some food prepared by the priests (*pujaris*) who are designated for that purpose. *Upacaras* i.e. offers can also be the waving of the fan and the fly-whisk, and the rite of circumambulation is also an *upacara*, since it shows honour to the deity. But especially the flame, a camphor light, a five wick oil lamp was important before one was put aside after a day (Fuller 1992).

What was also interesting was that the drivers claimed that through their Darsán, Lord Shiva was in turn kept alive. It was an obligation to see him at least once every day, otherwise he was not only disappointed but he could even disappear. During my visit, Banares was visited by a famous Sanyasin and all the drivers went to see him. He, too, was a living symbol or an incarnation of the value placed upon renunciation.

Visual Religiosity and Psychological Understanding

Both interviews and observations confirmed to a very high degree that the behavioural/ritual, the olfactory, dramatic, the tactile and the perceptive dimensions of the ritual are of immense importance. When one searches for valid models for a psychological understanding, these *non-cognitive dimensions* of religiosity must be taken seriously. The Sanskrit term Darsán — to see and to be seen — as an emic religious concept, must be linked to the more social scientific language of visual hermeneutic and psychological semiotics. In the terms of D W Winnicott and E H Erikson, the symbol of the god and the regular returning to be seen by the god is one of the psychological wellsprings of the dual character of the religious experience; the ritual of confirmation of a relation to an aspect that transcends ordinary life on the transitional space (Pruyser 1974; Rizutto 1979).

One crucial observation stemming from theories of psychology that elucidates the folk religiosity, especially the role of *arati* or *puja* of many Indians, is what I would like to label the *visual dimension of theology*. The rituals in the Kashi Kedara temple provide stylized behavioural patterns where partipators act and react in relation to the symbol for the transcendence, in my examples the Shiva *Lingam*, his bull *Nandi* or a statue.

In western verbal religious traditions these visual and behavioural elements always have to compete, so to speak, with the cognitive content of the dogma, a preaching of a priest or the systematic thoughts of the theologians. In the *puja* or in the *arati*, and above all in the informants' stories of why they undertook the *puja*, there is a clear experiential *interplay* between both the iconic and un-iconic symbols of Shiva (especially the Shiva *lingam*) and the individual coming to the temple to take Darsán (Wulff 1982). The visitor comes to see, to smell, to touch, to dress, to feed, etc., Lord Shiva. But at the same time Lord Shiva sees, blesses and comforts the visitor of the temple without a mediating preacher or priest explaining things in a cognitive manner. In that way the symbol of Shiva is simultaneously both a *reciever* of the reverence from the pious man and the *giver* of blessing. This *interaction* in the meeting with the deity is to a very low degree talked about or reflected over during the rituals, but instead it is dramatized and experienced through all the senses. Thus, the rituals are to a high degree a dramatic, visual or perceptual undertaking more than a cultivating or reformulating of "inner beliefs" (Wikström 1990). And therefore I think it is wise to relate an *emic* Hindu term for what is going on in the temples and shrines to the *ethic* concepts of psychological theory.

The Sanskrit concept *Darsán* can thus be understood as a kind of theological/mythological expression of what a psychologist can interpret as a role interaction between a symbol for transcendence and the individual. *Darsán* is therefore important, not only on a historic, semantic or a descriptive level, but as a term for a basic psychological condition for the experience of and the maintenance of the reality of the deity in the religiosity of these drivers.

Many Gods in one Mental Representation

In my interviews I found a radically polytheistic religiosity. At virtually all levels of life and thought, there seemed to be a cultural and religious multiplicity (Hertel et al 1993). It is not monotheism and it is not polytheism, at least if we label polytheism as the worship of many gods, each with partial authority and a limited sphere of influence. Instead the way the drivers prayed and described their beliefs indicates a *kathenotheism* — the worship of one god at a time. Each god is exalted in turn. Each is praised as a creator, source, and sustainer of the universe when one stands in the presence of that very deity — often Shiva. There are many gods, but their multiplicity does not diminish the significance or power of any of them. Each of the great gods may serve as a lense through which the whole of reality is clearly seen. This could be seen especially outside the Kedara temple.

In addition to the central sanctum, dedicated to Lord Shiva, there were a dozen shrines to other deities. Asked about how many gods there are, all answer something like: of course there are many gods. There is Shiva there and Ganesha, Hanuman, Ganga, Durga, Kali and the others, but at the same time there is really only one. The differences of name and form (*nama rupa*) was a common phrase, used often to describe the visible, changing world of *samsara* and the multiple worlds of the gods. Thus, there is only *one* reality, but the names and the forms by which it is known have to be different. It is like clay, which is one, but which takes on various names and forms as one sees it in bricks, vessels pots and dishes. Foremost the maniness is not superseded by oneness. Rather two are held simultaneously and are inextricably related (Eck, 1985).

The drivers inner representation of Lord Shiva as a psychological reality is not glued together so much in terms of early experiences in relation to a particular mother or father figure (McDargh 1982; Kakar 1982) — a reductionistic simplification — but it must instead be understood more as a continuous social construction through a daily *puja* or *arati*. The faith in or

the reality of Shiva is thus not a relation to a clear cut "inner object" but more a result of a daily ongoing dynamic process. A *visual* and *behavioural hermeneutic* is therefore an important means for the psychological understanding of the conditions behind the reality character of the religious experience.

If we translate these observations to the object-relation theory, we must say that the concept "the" god representation — in the singular — that has been in the centre of the past decades' debate in psychology of religion (Jones 1991) must be broadly elaborated in order to do justice to the Indian folk religiosity, where a multiplicity of gods dwells in the same family and in the same individual. Where the god in a specific cultural space is both one and many, male and female, both evil and good, both destroyer and sustainer, there must be a different kind of inner psychological representation of the belief systems compared to them from in the west. Thus, Lord Shiva as a mental representation in my drivers and his psychological genesis, maintainance, function and content must be understood as being distinctively different from the gods representation in ordinary western monotheistic religions.

Of course the *content* of the belief system is taken from Hindu mythology and narratives where kathentheism is common, but the *genesis* of this inner representation must also be understood as a cultural construction (Sakala 1981). The *function* of this Shiva representation is not only to provide a psychodynamic emotional equilibrium, but also to allow the individual to be a part of a socially constructed worldview. By means of this he reaches the realms of transcendence and creates an inner *spiritual Self* or identity that is supported by the *individual* and the *familial Self*.

The Spiritual Self — Maintained Through *Darsán*

My perspectives of the self are related to Hallowell's contributions on the Self (1955) as profoundly interrelated with its social and cultural environment. One of his important orientations — that the use of indigenous conceptions of the self is at the base of a scientific understanding — is closely related to my observations and interviews with the ricksha drivers as to the role of *Darsán*.

In terms of object-relation theory applied to religion, the riksha drivers did not seem to have a strict border between their *personal* "inner gods representations", their *family* representations (ancestors and relatives) and the *spiritual* representations, i.e. the aniconic (the Shiva lingam) or iconic

images of Shiva (statues) in the Kedarar temple or "used" elsewhere in arati and in puja. (I will discuss this in a theoretical paper where I analyze how the drivers used relational words when they described themselves, the families and the deities).

This brings me to a general discussion of how the regular *Darsán* of Lord Shiva relates to the informants' three selves: the individual, the family and the spiritual self. This *spiritual self* is often ignored in psychological studies or reduced, but as I found it, it is the central system in my informants' identity formation and identity maintenance. The visual and ritual "use" of the Shiva lingam or statue and the regularity of ritual offering kept their spiritual self in the centre of their personality. All of these three selves were linked to significant religious objects which in their turn were incorporated and nourished their self esteem (Satow 1983).

From a cross-cultural perspective, the distinctions between these three broad categories of self are of value in various ways. By *familiar self* I mean a basic inner psychological organization that enables women and men to function well within the hierarchical intimacy relationship of the extended family, community of groups. The familial self encompasses several important sub-organizations that involve intensely emotional intimacy relationships, with their emotional connectedness and interdependence. In relationship-centred cultures like India there is a constant affective exchange through permeable outer ego boundaries, a highly private self is not maintained, high levels of empathy and reciprocity to others are cultivated, and the experiential sense of self is of "we-ness". Here we have socially contextual ego ideas.

The *individualized self*, on the other hand, is the predominant inner psychological organization enabling a person to function in a highly mobile society where considerable autonomy is granted if not even imposed upon the individual. The individual must choose from a variety of options in a contractual, egalitarian relationship governed by a predominant cultural principle of individualism. The individualized self is characterized by inner representational organizations that emphasize; an individualistic "I-ness", with relatively self-contained outer boundaries, sharp differentiation between inner images of self and other. It is built of modes of cognition and ego-functioning that are strongly oriented towards rationalism, self-reflection, mobility and adaptability to extrafamilial relationship (Roland 1989).

The *spiritual self* is the inner spiritual reality that relates man to a transcendent realm. It is realized and experienced to varying extents by a number of persons through a variety of spiritual disciplines (Davies 1992).

The spiritual self is usually expressed through a complex structure of gods and goddesses as well as through rituals. According to my interviews this spiritual self seems to be a basic assumption and is psychologically engraved in the preconscious.

I therefore think it is impossible to understand the Indian psyche without understanding the psychological function of this inner spiritual self. The assumption of an inner spiritual reality within everyone and the possibility of spiritual realization through the many paths are fundamental to the understanding of the consciousness and preconsciousness of the Indian. Within the Indian context, these assumptions have to be explicitly denied when they are not implicitly adhered to — in contrast to the dominant rational scientific culture of the contemporary secular West, where they are usually ignored or denigrated.

This it not to say that all my drivers are actively engaged in or even interested in spiritual pursuits and disciplines. From a psychological standpoint, however, phenomenologically one can observe an inner experiential ego state or a kind of consciousness separated from everyday waking and dream consciousness, with a different sense of inner being. This is activated and nurtured in the puja. Seen from a psychoanalytic perspective we can call it a transitional sphere (Pruyser 1974). Perhaps esthetic experiences are experientially closest to the kinds of inner ego states present in various ritual practices, like the arati.

The relation between the familial self and the spiritual self is complex. The spiritual self simultaneously encompasses both continuity with (see above all Fuller 1992) and counterpoint to various aspects of the familial self. The drivers recognized the psychological phenomenon or experiential duality of the phenomenological self (*jiva*), particularly in the everyday consciousness of I-ness (*ahamkara*) versus the inner experience of spirit or *Atman*. Simultaneously Hindu thinking is profoundly monistic in its positing various aspects of the phenomenological world, including the phenomenological self, as essentially a manifestation of *Brahman*.

Experientially a person may not be aware of this. Further, the fundamental goal of all relationships and living is the gradual self-transformation toward finer and subtler qualities and refined aspects of power in the quest for self realization. This cultural view is formalized in Sankyan philosophy in its emphasis on the different qualities (*gunas*). Thus there exist paradoxical assertions that the spiritual self is simultaneously on a continuum with the familial self and at the same time a counterpoint to it. In the hierarchical social relationship and in the spiritual

self, the Hindu cultural worldview gives religious meaning to interpersonal transaction.

In hierarchical social relationships governed by the quality of the person, there is a marked veneration of the superior, with strong efforts to subordinate oneself, to be as close as possible to a religious symbol or a sannyasin in order to incorporate, identify with and share the superior qualities of the other for the self-transformation. These focal attitudes of attention by quality, originating in childhood, are later extended to more and more venerated beings — from highly respected family and community members to gurus and to the worship of various gods, goddesses and avatars or incarnations. i.e. there exists a continuity between the familial self and the spiritual self.

In bhakti devotional worship, various facets of symbiosis-reciprocity involved in hierarchical intimacy relationships become clearly accentuated. Intense emotional connectedness and reciprocal affective exchanges, a sense of we-ness, and permeable ego boundaries are all intensely involved in *bhakti*. The devotee seeks through emotionality to be merged with the god, goddess, or incarnation — whether Shiva, Durga, Krishna or whoever — and in turn through the merger expects the reciprocity of the divine blessing. In the worship of Krishna, the most frequent of Bhakti cults, men draw upon their early identification with the maternal-feminine to identify consciously with Radha in her divine passion with Krishna. However, these experiences are in psychoanalytical theories often reduced to regressive traits or searching for an omnipotent union in the early mother-infant symbiotic tie (Kakar 1978, 151–190). The psychological reality is, however, not that the path of Bhakti is a regression to more symbiotic modes of relating, but that the devotees use their internalized symbiotic modes in the service of their spiritual practice. Further, the imagery of a symbiotic, familial mode of relating becomes a metaphor for another level of union, or at least a complex interplay of different levels of monistic reality with an intentional ambiguity.

What has been profoundly overlooked is that however much these religious modes of worship and experiences are related to the intense mother-child symbiotic relationship, the actual religious experience enables the person to become increasingly individuated, differentiated and separated from the emotional familial involvement. This experience thus becomes an essential counterpoint to the familial self and in this process the concept of Darsán will be helpful.

Conclusion

Psychological studies of Indian folk religiosity are not well developed. It is argued that the focus of intrapsychological and emotional processes, so far very popular, must be replaced or at least supplemented by underlining the role of visual perception and behaviour during the rituals. By a psychological elaboration of the Sanskrit term *Darsán* in relation to an empirical investigation of riksha-drivers "use" of their rituals, one can demonstrate the necessity of letting the scholarly psychological-scientific language (ethic) be confronted by an internal religious concept of an experiential character (emic). In that way a theoretical development occurs simultaneously with a more phenomenological close-reading of the pious interviewee's self-understanding.

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