

## Symbol, Idol and Mūrti: Hindu God-images and the Politics of Mediation

By: Gregory Price Grieve

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### **Abstract:**

South Asian god-images challenge scriptural understandings of religion. Scripturalism is a pattern of mediation that reifies texts as ahistorical and uses them to legitimise specific regimes of practices and beliefs. In scripturalism, the divine is viewed as super-sensible, non-material, dichotomous and self-creating. While scripturalism may at one time have been solely a 'Western' concern, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it also has come to be used by Hindu fundamentalist groups. Scripturalism mediates god-images through two interpretive strategies: symbolism and idolatry. Seemingly opposed, both erase the materiality of the god-images by supplementing them to scripture. Drawing on ethnographic accounts of everyday religious practice in Bhaktapur, Nepal, I argue that South Asian god-images should be understood as 'mūrtis', humanly constructed deities dominated by their material element. God-images, furthermore, are brought to life by being enmeshed in a net of social practices.

### **Article:**

*I never pass by a wooden fetish, a gilded Buddha, a Mexican idol without reflecting: perhaps it is the true God.* (Charles Baudelaire (cited in Benjamin 1996 [1928]: 448))

### **Introduction: looking at a stone-god**

When I arrived in Nepal in June 1995 to begin fieldwork, one of the first questions I was asked was 'So just what is (a) god?'. It was the early afternoon on the twenty-sixth, and I was drinking a Coke and writing down some scratch field notes. The questioner was one of the ubiquitous high school students-cum-predatory guides who had just peeled himself off a large group of tourists. After I declined a tour, he saw me taking notes, so he sat down next to me and asked what I was doing. I told him I was in Nepal to study religion. He looked me askance and asked: 'So just what is (a) god?'. I could not answer. I was silenced not by a lack of concepts, but rather because as the school student asked the question, he teasingly pointed across the square to the material god-image (*loha(n)dya:*) of the god Bhairava (Bhailadya:) (Figure 1).



**Figure 1** Bhairava mask from Bhaktapur's Dance, Purna Chitrakar (1999). 22.5 × 18 inches. (Photo: G. P. Grieve, 1999).

One of the most common religious practices in South Asia is '*darśan*', which occurs when a devotee gazes upon a material image of a god (Eck 1996). Stop and take a second look at the god-image of Bhairava, a fierce form of śiva from the Nepalese city of Bhaktapur (Figure 1). What can you make of this image? Bhairava is a stone god (*loha(n)dya:*) – a humanly constructed concrete deity. '*Loha(n)dya:*' literally translates from the Newar (Nepal Bhāsā) as 'stone (*loha[n]*) god (*dya:*)' and is the local idiom for the pan-South Asian notion of '*mūrti*'. *Mūrtis* are concrete signs of gods and can be either aniconic or iconic. They are the ritually consecrated images at the centre of the chief form of Hindu religious practice, worship (*pujā*).

What occurs when one looks face-to-face with Bhairava's god-image? What can one make of this stone god? If you, like me, find yourself trained in and by 'Western' academic discourses or have been trained in educational systems in other parts of the globe which gain distinction by modelling themselves on elite occidental pedagogy, it is difficult to face up to Bhairava's

otherness (Bourdieu 1977, 1984).<sup>1</sup> This god-image challenges one's understanding. When one gazes at his three fish-like eyes (two large, one small), sharp, fanged teeth, flaming orange-red lips and elaborate, multicoloured, snake-encrusted headdress it is hard to escape one's own historical, class and geographic bias. In a skewed Levinasian sense, the 'idol's' face resists our powers to understand (Levinas 1969: 81). In short, a look at Bhairava shows that there is no innocent 'eye', no naive viewing. What you see is not always what you get. Instead, what we see depends on mediation. That is, because our descriptions of the world are culturally located, our 'naive' descriptions are neither innocent nor objective. Rather, all social objects are mediated by intervening socially grounded, culturally generated and historically particular mechanisms. Moreover, these intervening mechanisms are not neutral, but are marbled through and through with power relations. For instance, the Bhairava image that hangs on the wall of my office holds a different social meaning than an image of the god *in situ*. In such a case, the image transforms from 'god' into 'art'. That is, the stone-god's *in situ* contextual divine meaning is replaced with a depoliticised aesthetic one.

The resistance to the god-image occurs because, while many of us are outwardly too sophisticated to employ the nomenclature of idolatry and devil worship, the habit still lingers (Appadurai 1986; Eck 1981; Waghorn *et al.* 1994).<sup>2</sup> There is systematic and widespread underemployment of the visual senses in every field of academic study (Arnheim 1969: 3). In religious studies, it creates patterns of knowledge by which all religious discourse is reduced to scripture. This is especially ironic in the study of Hinduism, where god-images are the most obvious and empirically observable manifestation of religion in South Asia (Waghorn *et al.* 1985; 1994). In short, while the most observable of all South Asian religious practices, because of the Western academic tendency to privilege scripture, god-images tend to be all but ignored in scholarship. In religious studies, such 'Book-knowledge' reproduces 'scripturalism', a pattern of mediation that reifies texts as ahistorical and uses them to legitimise a specific regime of practices and beliefs. Scripturalism rests upon a transcendental understanding of the divine as super-sensible, non-material, dichotomous and self-creating. As I spell out below, while scripturalism at one time may have been a 'Western' orientalist affair, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries it has also come to be used by Hindu nationalist groups such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

To form a non-scriptural view of god-images, I turn to ethnographic accounts of everyday religious practice in Bhaktapur, Nepal.<sup>3</sup> Yet, my aim here is not to reify my historically particular

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Western' reinforces many of the Orientalist practices that this paper is trying to dispel (see Said 1978). For my present purposes, however, it is a convenient shorthand for many of the theories I wish to critique. Accordingly, I use the term, but I employ it 'sous rature', [under erasure](Derrida 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Scholars can no longer 'get away with' describing images such as Bhairava's as 'idols – all of them crude, misshapen and ugly' (Ward 1863: xxxi cited in Waghorn *et al.* 1985). Few would argue that in the worship of images 'the government of God is subverted, and all the moral effects arising from the knowledge of his perfections and his claims upon his rational creatures, are completely lost' (Ward 1863: xxxi–xxxii cited in Waghorn *et al.* 1985). This is not true of many contemporary Christian Fundamentalist groups. For instance, in his March 23, 1995 TV show 700 Club, Mr. Pat Robertson labelled Hinduism as demonic. He stated, 'Of all of India's problems, one stands out from the rest. That problem is idol worship'. And closer to this study, the Nazarenne Missions International, of Kansas City, MO, which is currently undergoing a 'mission of prayer' to the Newar people in Bhaktapur, Nepal reproduces much of the nomenclature on idolatry and devil worship.

<sup>3</sup> Following Michel de Certeau (1984), by everyday religious practices I mean those social actions and discourses that are so commonplace that they often go unarticulated. These include such 'common sense' occurrences as bodily

and geographically specific observations into a universal account. Instead, my twofold aim is first, in a necessary critical moment, to maintain that scriptural mediation of god- images can be broken down into two ‘strategies’: symbolism and idolatry. While seemingly opposed, because both strategies deny the materiality of god-images they both end up reducing them to scripture. And second, in a constructive moment, I argue that Bhairava is a *mūrti*: a humanly constructed deity whose material element dominates. The material image gains ‘power’ (*śakti*) because it is brought to ‘life’ (*jīva*) by being situated in an everyday net (*janjal*) of social practices. The defamiliarisation created by Bhairava’s god- image maps the politics of mediation surrounding Hindu god-images. Yet, before I detail either the critical or constructive moments of the argument, it is necessary to spell out the ‘Bookish’ cultural logic behind ‘scripturalism’.

### *Scripturalism: colonial and post-colonial readings of the Book*

Idolatry is only the hieroglyphic writ large, in popular character; it came because unlettered man carves in sticks and stones his rude and simple imagination of a god; and this way of expressing the notion by handiwork continues among even highly intellectual societies, until at last the idea becomes too subtle and sublime to be rendered by any medium except the written word. (Waddell 1915: 1958)

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida writes that the ‘West’ is ‘the civilization of the [B]ook’ (1974: 3). He goes on to argue that Western religion, philosophy, literature and the very conception of the world are inextricably woven into the Book. In a narrow sense, a book is a collection of sheets of printed pages, bound together to form a material whole. Yet, as Derrida argues, in a more abstract sense, the Book with its front and back cover, its first and last page, is a model of a desire for completion, wholeness, and closure that upholds a desire for etiology and teleology. In short, the Book is a strategy for mediating knowledge that forces discourse into (1) a predetermined ‘plot’ that has a beginning and end, and (2) is written by an author/god who, existing prior to the writing of the Book, guarantees its truth. Readers of the Book are seen as passive receptors of the author/god’s intended truth.

Derrida equates the strategy of the Book with ‘logocentrism’, a chief component of which is the ‘transcendental signifier’. Derrida posits that a transcendental signifier is simultaneously conceived as (1) outside the semiotic structure, and thus beyond scrutiny or challenge; and (2) at the very centre, providing the structure with an unchanging anchor. While this transcendental signifier has changed over the course of history (Man, Imagination, Reason, Being), all these ‘god terms’ are just reverberations of the Christian creator god. In fact, as Derrida suggests, while the idea of the Book stretches across the whole of Western thought, it echoes the exegetical study of the Bible (2002: 102–136).

As I mentioned above, logocentric readings of religious texts leads to ‘scripturalism’ – a pattern of mediation that reifies texts as ahistorical and uses them to legitimise a specific regime of practices and beliefs. Through orientalism, scripturalism was imported from Europe and America to South Asia. For instance, as Joanne Waghorne has shown, when European ‘orientalist’ scholars first encountered Indian religions they forced the diverse traditions and practices into a

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comportment, micro-social strategies, as well as preference and disposition. Accordingly, a theory of everyday religion foregrounds pragmatic, this-worldly practices such as ceremonies, rites of passage, and religious processions. Of course it does not follow that everyday religion is more autochthonous and thus more authentic. (For a more detailed account see Grieve 2002.)

Procrustean Bed of scripture (Waghorne *et al.* 1991).<sup>4</sup> As Richard King has argued, such scripturalism has forced Indian religions into a ‘world religions’ echo of Christian theology (1999). Ironically, however, while in the nineteenth century the ‘booking of Hinduism’ may have been solely a Western orientalist concern, by the twentieth century scripturalism had become one of the most powerful rhetorical tropes of *Hindutva* fundamentalist political groups such as India’s Bharatiya Janata Party (Jafferlot 1996; Waghorne *et al.* 1991).

Scripturalism rests upon a transcendental understanding of the divine as super-sensible, non-material, dichotomous and self-creating. It differentiates itself by accusing others of idolatry – the worship of material human constructions. Hindu Vedantic texts, at least since the time of the *Upanishads*, have articulated such ‘mystic’ transcendental notions of the divine. Yet, as King has demonstrated, the ‘discovery’ of Vedantic scripture as the central theology of Hinduism is a European orientalist construction (1999). As he writes, this view of Hinduism is ‘a romantic and exotic fantasy of Indian religions as deeply mystical, introspective and otherworldly in nature’ (1999: 142). In short, while the transcendental conceptions were there before Europeans arrived, it took the orientalists to define such concepts as the essence of Hinduism. Still, in the m~obius-strip discourse that colonialism has created, current Hindu ‘fundamentalist’ notions strongly voice a scriptural Vedāntic understanding of the religion (Ghosh 1999; Jafferlot 1996). Putting a reverse spin on nineteenth-century pejorative dialogues, Neo-Vedantic conceptions of Hinduism are used by nationalistic groups to claim the spiritual superiority of the East over the idolatrous material West. For instance, in Bansi Pandit’s *The Hindu Mind: Fundamentals of Hindu Religion and Philosophy for All Ages* (1990), the author defines Hinduism as the eternal religion (*Sanatana Dharma*) that is founded on a supreme reality (*Nirguna Brahman*) and rooted in the Vedas.

My concern is not simply academic. Far from being a neutral taxonomy, the ‘Book’ tends to structure knowledge to benefit not only the West, but also elite educated males (Ong 1967; Sullivan 1990). In the human sciences, ‘bookish’ knowledge has tended to privilege the linguistic, the discursive, and the cognitised over the visceral and tacit. It tends to lead to what Pierre Bourdieu has labelled logology, ‘words about words’ (Bourdieu 1989). As we have seen, the cautions about scripturalism are even more apt for religious studies; the subtle knowledge modelling of the book transforms all religion into a poor reflection of a Protestant-based Christianity (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). The concern is not just with content, but with strategies of mediation. These paradigms emphasise a series of hierarchical dichotomies between such categories as sacred and profane, belief and practice, doctrine and law, individual and community, universalising and particularising, as well as tradition and modernity. As Joanne Waghorne has shown, the modelling of religious practice on the book is even more distorting for the study of South Asian religions (Waghorne *et al.* 1985, 1991). Not only has it forced Hinduism to conform to a Christian theological model, but it has inadvertently strengthened Hindu fundamentalisms. As Waghorne has argued, what orientalists ‘once argued with words’, fundamentalist groups now ‘fight with bricks and blood’ (Waghorne *et al.* 1991: 8).

In short, whether wielded by orientalist scholars or Hindu ‘fundamentalists’, the scriptural mediation of Hinduism not only masks how god-images are actually used in everyday practice,

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<sup>4</sup> Waghorne *et al.* (1985) also shows that while scholars engaged in scripturalism, the government of the Raj and other English practices actually partook of a dialogue of ritualism and material culture.

but perpetuates a damaging rhetoric. If we understand the strategies of this mediation, and what harm they cause, we may be able to correct some of their 'iatrogenic' damage.

### *Hypocritical scholarship: two scriptural mediating strategies*

The first of these more specific polemically charged words is the term 'idol'. This word repeatedly has been misused by purported scholars of Hinduism – and again, by both Euro-American, as well as Indian scholars – and it has been continuously and unthinkingly used by even religious Hindus to this very day. At least once a month I get notices from Hindu temples inviting me to 'idol' installations, *pujās* to the 'idol', etc. ('Word As Weapon: The Polemically Charged Use of Terminology')

From a scripturalist position, god-images are seen at best as supplements, and at worst as deterrents, to a real understanding of the divine. Mirroring this, scriptural accounts tend toward two mediating strategies: symbolism and idolatry. By mediating strategy, I mean to gloss no particular school, method, or theory, but rather the wider tactics by which god-images are 'turned into' Book-knowledge.

The first interpretative strategy, symbolism, erases the materiality of god-images by positing them as material signs of spiritual transcendental categories. In *Images and Symbols* Mircea Eliade writes that images, symbols and symbolism have now become current coin (Eliade 1969). Some 50 years later this symbolic 'coin' has circulated for so long and through so many hands, that its human-made character has been all but forgotten. Like an overused trademark, 'symbol' has passed into the background of the tacit taken-for-granted reality of not only what it means to practice religious studies, but religion. Yet, because symbolism is such common currency, the implications of its use have become obscured. In symbolic 'veneration', worship is conceived not as being given to the god-image, but rather through it to the spiritual essence the material image is perceived to actually reveal (Eliade 1959; Ricoeur 1970: 31). In the broadest sense, the symbolic function has been posed as the general function of mediation by which consciousness constructs all perception and discourse (Cassirer 1946). In the narrowest sense it means something other than what is said (Ricoeur 1970: 12). Always, however, the symbol is a vehicle at once universal and particular. Moreover, because symbols' referents are often vague, the symbol is crucial for bringing together abstract scriptural concepts and concrete signs (Firth 1973: 6–17, 55; Ricoeur 1976: 53).

The second mediating strategy, idolatry, interprets concrete gods such as Bhairava as material objects of irrational reverence or obsessive devotion. In the simplest sense, an idol is an image or statue of a deity fashioned to act as an object of worship. Yet, often such worship is perceived as immoral because idolatry gives the name of God to that which is not God. For instance, all three religions of the Book – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – condemn it because idolatry is the worship of a humanly manufactured signifier rather than the uncreated divine. Yet, because all signification is dependent on material signs, all religions must worship matter to some extent. Accordingly, 'idolatry' is not simply the worship of matter, but the accusation of another's 'strange worship' (Halbental and Margalit 1992). Lingering in the rhetoric of the idol is one of the most persistent forms of orientalism. Historically, idolatry's condemnation differs in the form it takes and towards whom it is directed, but in every situation idolatry is a strategy by which a 'community [creates] self-definition through its idea of what is excluded and through its notion of "the other"' (Halbental and Margalit 1992: 17, 236).

Idolatry has become an important academic strategy in the discipline of religious studies. For instance, Bruce Lincoln, in *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, describes ‘profanophanies’, instances in which the Church was shown to be not eternal but ‘in full temporal reality: a human institution, not one divine’ (Lincoln 1989: 125). While seeming the opposite of symbolism, such idolic reduction also operates through scriptural revelatory terms. Because, as Lincoln writes, the exhumations reveal not an ‘assault on religion per se, but rather on one specific religious institution’ (Lincoln 1989: 127). In short, idolic reduction is not a critique about subjugating material signs to abstract ideals, but about accusing others of worshipping the wrong abstract ideals. Accordingly, idolic reduction is usually not used in its purely critical form. Generally, the mediating strategy is a twofold manoeuvre. First, the interpreter accuses the worshipper of misrecognition (the false worship of idolatry). Second, the interpreter introduces an abstract category that is given as the real addressee of the worshiper. The idolic reduction, then, is not merely the critique of idols per se. Like any accusation of idolatry, it alleges incorrect worship while implying the existence of a correct form of worship.

Neo-Hindu and Hindutva sources are keenly aware of the rhetorical value of ‘idolatry’. A post to a discussion thread on [www. Hind.net](http://www.Hind.net), reads: ‘There are a number of terms that are applied to Hinduism in the Press, not only in the West but in India itself, which foster a negative image of it. Hindus are called worshippers of idols’. The thread goes on to state: ‘However, there is a strange dichotomy in how such religions are judged. When they are part of the Christian tradition they are called icons and classified as works of art and regarded as sacred in nature. When they are non-Christian or pagan traditions they are called idols’.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, much contemporary neo-Hindu mediation of the role of god- images follows the strategy of symbolic reduction. There is no doubt that these neo-Hindu accounts are patterned on historical Hindu sources. Yet, there is also no doubt that these traditional sources have been mediated through Romantic Western understandings of symbolism. For instance, a post on [www.hinduwebsite.com](http://www.hinduwebsite.com) posits: ‘[Hindu symbols] convey deeper philosophical truths, not obvious immediately to ordinary individuals. Like all manifest creation, they also have a manifest content and a hidden content’. Often the notion of symbolism is posed as an apology. For instance, a web article titled *AUM*, published on the *Nation of Hindutva* homepage, suggests: ‘Hinduism is famous for its so-called idol-‘worship’ (it is important to note that this is a misappellation, since it is not, in fact, the idol that Hindus worship, but the concepts and values which the individual is reminded of by that idol)’. This need for an apology occurs, as Mr. Naveen D. Arcot writes in *Symbolism in Hinduism*, because ‘in the absence of such an understanding the whole periphery of Hinduism will appear funny, unintelligent and absurd. In the process of knowing this science of symbolism one discovers the deeper meaning of the real Hindu tradition’. As Rajiv Malhotra suggests in *The Position of Hinduism in America's Higher Education*, the need for such apologies occur when Hindus interact as a minority with Abrahamic traditions. ‘In American neighborhoods, [Hindus] are asked to define their beliefs in the Judeo-Christian categories of monotheism and polytheism – a dualism that does not exist in Hinduism – and told that they are idol worshippers’.

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<sup>5</sup> This missive, posted by ‘Chadan’, is based on an article by Dr. David Frawley (also known as Vamadeva Shastri), of the American Institute of Vedic Studies (<http://www.vedanet.com/>). ‘Redactions’ of this article are found across the web.

The danger with the two scriptural mediating strategies is *not* that Hinduism is being interpreted through outsider categories. The danger is that they tend to perpetuate what Bruce Lincoln calls ‘immoral discourses’, that is, those that ‘systematically operate to benefit the already privileged members of society at the expense of others’ (1981: 112). For instance, rather than being an essential object, the ‘idol’ is created by a constellation of discourses that are linked with the idea of misrepresentation. Similarly, the danger with symbolism is that the material god images are hijacked to reveal a scriptural transcendental signified and to reinforce a dominant view of the world. In both cases, Bhairava is defaced. He is no longer situated in his own domain of social practices, but becomes a signifier of scriptural transcendental categories. In short, both mediating strategies are hypocritical. They hide their own agenda behind the mask of the ‘other’.

### *A stone god (loha(n)dya:) – the social life of a Mūrti*

To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. (Walter Benjamin 1969: 188)

Bhairava is neither an idol nor a symbol. He is a stone god (*loha(n)dya:*), a humanly constructed material deity which is brought to life in a conversation of gazes. In a stone-god the material component (signifier) is the dominant element. To understand how such concrete images are used to construct the divine, what needs be attended to are the local cultural logics in which they are situated. To understand how social practices transmute a stone into a stone god, let us return to the opening scene of the essay and ask ‘what is a god?’. As the high school student-cum-predatory guide asked me ‘what is a god?’ he simultaneously pointed to Bhairava’s god image (*mūrti*) (Figure 1). The indexicality of the student’s ‘pointing’ indicates the two aspects necessary to constitute a stone god: a relational component, and a material sign. These two components are summed up in a statement by Ma(n)gāl Laxsmi Sāhi, a souvenir seller with whom I often sat and chatted. When I asked her what a god was she answered: ‘A god is that which all people respect (*maneyayegu*). Normally we say a god is a stone god (*loha(n)dya:*)’ (personal interview, 16 July 1999).

Let me reverse the order of Ms. Sāhi’s sentences and take her second point first: ‘Normally we say a god (*dya:*) is a *mūrti* (*loha(n)dya:*)’. Ms. Sāhi’s words stress the importance of the material aspect of the god. If asked to differentiate between the concept of a god (*dya:*) and its material depiction, people in Bhaktapur will call the depiction a ‘stone god’ (*loha(n)dya:*). In the words of Durukaji Suwal, a farmer and labourer: ‘A *mūrti* is a stone (*loha(n)*) which has been made into a god (*dya:*)’ (personal interview, 8 July 1999). Yet, all stones are not *mūrtis*. As Madhu Chitrakar, a local artist in Bhaktapur, voiced, ‘there are rocks in the river, there are stones on the road, but they are not a *mūrti* until life (*jīva*) is given to them’ (personal interview, 13 August 1999). So while one needs material signs to signify god, not all material signs will do.

Stones are constituted as stone gods (*loha(n)dya:*) in two ways: descriptively, and through ceremonies and continuing rituals (*pujā*) which give the stone life (*jīva*). Descriptively *mūrtis* depict the deity. As Līlabhakta Munikarmi said, ‘If you believe in (the god) Vishnu then you need a *mūrti* describing what he looks like. You know him the same way you would know by seeing your father’s photograph. That he has two arms, hair and also you can see the fashion of the time’ (personal interview, 10 June 1999). In this sense the carved image is seen as an aid to visualising the god. Yet, not only are there carved statues which are not *mūrtis*, there are many



aniconic stones which are worshipped as gods. The symbolic signification is secondary to the stone god's power (*śakti*) that is created by its life force (*jīva*). *Mūrtis* can be both symbolic and have 'power', but it is *jīva* which transforms the stone (*loha(n)*) into a stone god (*loha(n)dya:*). As Krishna Pradhānā(n)ga voiced: 'A *mūrti* is something which has been given tantric *śakti*. And which can give us *śakti*. But something else is just a symbol' (personal interview, 6 June 1999). Hence, while the descriptive quality and conceptual levels of a *mūrti* are important, they are not the defining features. Because, as Krishna Pradhānā(n)ga went on to say, 'a statue has not been given religious power (*tantric śakti*), but a stone-god has' (personal interview, 6 June 1999). This is especially significant for Bhairavas, most of which are aniconic. What this demonstrates is that instead of an iconic symbolic representation, a *mūrti*'s signification comes from giving life to a stone. In fact, a *mūrti* is 'dead' until life is put into it through ceremonies. Thereafter the image is not merely a symbol of that deity, but it *is* that deity. For instance, when I asked Keshab Hada the difference between a statue and a *mūrti*, he said, 'A *mūrti* is when you give life to a statue, it becomes a *mūrti*. If you don't it is just a statue' (personal interview, 5 May 1999). Similarly as Ramesh Joshi voiced 'if we don't give life to a *mūrti*, it won't be a god' (personal interview, 18 June 1999).

Before I show how 'life' is given to stone, let me first give two pieces of evidence that *mūrtis* are signified as 'alive': one embedded in linguistic practice, and one in visual practice. Linguistically, Newar, the local language of Bhaktapur, has one of the world's most complicated classifier systems. English, on the other hand, has one of the least complicated, and only a few items – such as a 'glass' of water or a 'book' of matches – require a classifier. Newar, however, requires a classifier morpheme in order to code the quantity of every noun (Shakya 1997). These classifiers both differentiate between categories of inanimate nouns and also between animate and inanimate nouns. Animate nouns – a woman (*misā chamha*), two dogs (*khicha nimha*), six bugs (*ki khumha*) – require '*mha*'. Inanimate nouns receive a classifier depending on the shape of the objects and usage in the sentence; the general classifier is '*gu*'. Plants get their own classifier, '*ma*' – *cho chama* – a wheat plant. For native speakers of Newar these categories are intuitive and obvious. Without descending any deeper into the esoterics of Newar grammar, let me make my point: '*loha(n)dya: chamha*' signifies a *mūrti* (literally – 'stone god one-animate marker'). Thus a stone god (*loha(n)dya: chamha*) is placed linguistically in the same category as people.

Besides the linguistic level is that of visual signification. As I stated in the introduction, one of the ways that people in Bhaktapur indicate that they are going to worship a god is through the notion of *darśan*, which literally means 'to see'. People go for *darśan* for a number of reasons. Durukaji Suwal said '*darśan* is for the heart's contentedness' (personal interview, 8 July 1999). And Bashula Dyola voiced 'it gives you religion (*dharmā*)' (personal interview, 20 July 1999). And Krishna Pradhānā(n)ga said, '*darśan* is done for the benefit of the universe' (personal interview, 6 June 1999). And as Ramesh Joshi said, 'for bliss' (personal interview, 18 June 1999). But while people go for different reasons they practice *darśan* in a similar fashion. As Damodar Gautam said: 'To go to the temple and have a face-to-face with the god's image – that is *darśan*' (personal interview, 21 June 1999). When one goes and has a 'face-to-face' with the god, it is not just that the worshiper is seeing the god, but that the god looks back at the worshipers (Eck 1996: 6). In fact, one of the most prevalent features of the Newar landscape are the eyes which are painted on everything from the largest temples, such as Swayambunāth stupa which gazes down on the entire Kathmandu valley, to door frames that overlook courtyards,

down to small drsti eyes which one can buy at a local painter's house for plastering on household utensils. The seeing and being seen between worshiper and god, the investing a *Mūrti* with the ability to look at us in return, is a tactic for bringing it into social relations and thus constituting its personhood.

As the linguistic evidence and discourse of gazes show, life (*jīva*) is given to statues by embedding them in social relations. That is, a stone becomes a god when it is treated as if it were a person (Levy 1990: 282–83). But what do we mean by person? People in Bhaktapur are made. They are constituted through two main social semiotics: rites of passage, and a net of social relations. First, for Newars, creating a person is not a natural process, but a ritual process. The chief set of rituals are the rites of passage (*saṃskāras*), *amskāras*), a developmental sequence of life starting with writing on the infant's tongue, going through puberty rites, marriage, and ending with funeral ceremonies (Levy 1990: 658–86; Parish 1994: 233–75). In Newar culture, the innate, unrefined person is not viewed as sufficient for social life. As Tejeswar Babu Gongah once told me: 'Just as a rough rock is polished smooth, a child must be made into a person by culture' (personal interview, June 15 1997). The same goes for stone gods (*loha(n)dya*). For instance, when I asked Ram Locha Jha how a statue differed from a *mūrti* he replied:

If you are asking if a statue and *mūrti* are made out of the same material, it is the same. Even a *mūrti* of Narayan is also carved as others. But if you are asking about god's *mūrtis*, in a special rite we recite special Yagya mantras with, we give vitality, it becomes a *mūrti*. As we do adolescent boy's rite of passage for young men, and the young man is able to be religious (dharmanic) after the ceremony. So we do the same for god-images. ... We don't do this to statues. (personal interview, 9 May 1999)

Each year, Bhairava's mask (his personhood) undergoes a similar process as a Naudurga dancer. This *samskāric* cycle begins with the *daśa karma*, which *samskāric* cycle begins with the *daśa karma*, which is considered the god's rebirth, and then proceeds through the other rites of passage until it reaches its mature form.

In short, there is no absolute distinction between gods and people (Babb 1975: 52; Fuller 1992: 3). As a 'person' Bhairava both creates others, and is in turn created by his social relations with others. Newar society is tied together through a complex web of giving and receiving both goods and favours (Lewis 1984: 14). Newars in Bhaktapur speak of this web as a net (Parish 1996: 130). For Newars, the self is not bounded, but created by a net of social relations. As Madhu Chitrakar once said, 'life is not just for our selves, but also for relatives and family. You can't live only by yourself' (personal interview, 16 March 1999). And the Newar word for personality is '*ga(n)ta*', which can also mean concern, connection and reference. Hence the self is generated through interpersonal relationships. As Tejeswar Babu Gongah voiced, 'I am a different person to different people. To my father I am a son, to my son and daughters I am a father, to my teacher I was a student, to you I am a teacher' (personal interview, August 10 1995). In a contingent and mutually dependent fashion through these relations people make themselves, and in turn are made by others. Personhood, which is not limited to what we in the West would understand as human beings, is constituted by embedded relationships, a matrix of social relations (Parish 1984: 130, 186–187).

Hence, Bhairava is ‘alive’ (*jiva*) because he is set in a social net (*janjal*) of contingent mutual dependency in which he is treated as if he were a person. Yet, in this net, Bhairava is not just any person; he is extra-ordinary. As indicated in Ma(n)gāl Laxsmi Sāhi’s first statement – ‘a god is that which all people respect (*maneyayegu*)’ – how the *mūrti*’s social signification comes about is also relational. In fact a second meaning to *ga(n)tā* is ‘venerable personality’. *Ga(n)tā* is a noun made from the verb *ga(n)taye*, ‘to venerate’. Accordingly, as Lilabhakta Munikarmi, a local historian and folklorist, argued: ‘God is that thing we have to respect. Compared to ourselves it is huge. Our forefathers are also god. Those who give benefit are also god’ (personal interview, 10 June 1999). By respecting the god, one also expects to receive benefit from it. By giving something to Bhairava, one would expect to receive something back from him. It is a relationship full of benefits and duties.

Like social relations in Newar society as a whole, a stone god gains power from being entered into a net of social situations as if it were a person; as a giver and a receiver it is created and also creates. This happens not just between the god and worshipper, where the worshipper offers the god *pujā* and expects at the very least *prasād* in exchange. It also happens between gods (Fuller 1992: 3). For instance, during his festival of Biska: Jātrā, Akāśa Bhairava is seen to fight with his consort Bhadrakālī and then to make up with her by sending clothes and ornaments. As Appadurai and Breckenridge write, *mūrtis* such as Bhairava are treated as ‘paradigmatic sovereigns’ demanding and receiving respect from their devotees, and in turn, redistributing resources to the temple, servants, donors and worshipers (Appadurai 1986; Breckenridge 1976). This is a mutual act of *Samśāric* constitution. In Ram Lochā Jhā’s words: ‘As I told you before, a *mūrti* is nothing, on the one hand, and everything on the other. As we need something, the *mūrti* is the sign which says god also needs something’ (personal interview, 9 May 1999).

### **Conclusion: the stone-god looks back**

Who are you? – The guardian of the house. – . . . Are you in the Book? – My place is on the threshold. (Edmond Jabés, *Livre des questions* (cited in Derrida 1978: 76))

Take one last look at Bhairava’s god-image (Figure 1). When a statue is given life, it is said that its eyes have been opened. And during *darśan* once the images eyes are opened, it gazes back at the worshipers. Up until now, we’ve been looking at the god. What happens when the stone god looks back? In *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas writes that ‘everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion’ (Levinas 1969: 79). In a sense Bhairava’s god image both supports and transgresses Levinas’ understanding of the divine, and at the very least it qualifies it.

What the god-image qualifies is the scriptural bias of the Western understanding of the divine. Similarly, my encounter with the stone god – initially humiliating or, at best, frustrating – turned out to be serendipitous, for it defamiliarised me from the assumption that scripture must form the foundation of a religious tradition. It showed that in order to properly understand Hindu belief and practice one needs an understanding of situated everyday practice, especially the worship (*pujā*) of god-images (*mūrti*). My encounter indicates that to understand how the concrete god-image is used in everyday Hinduism one must understand that Bhairava is neither a symbol nor an idol, but a *mūrti*: a divine sign whose material component dominates. To a worshiper of everyday Hinduism, deities are not only transcendental concepts to be imagined, they are tangible practice – gods should be seen, heard, touched, and even tasted. Yet, while the material

element is crucial, for the stone to become a stone god it must be situated in *in situ* cultural logics, that is, the mutually contingent net of social relations which give life to the stone. In short, what the god-image demonstrates is that a scriptural understanding of god-images differs from an everyday one, not because of the former's use of material signs, but rather because the material signs are mediated differently.

I am not arguing, however, that to understand Hinduism we *merely* need more ethnographic evidence of the worship of god-images. On one hand, there is never simply evidence. No matter how detailed an ethnographic account, the local knowledge is always mediated. For instance, this article does not exist in an innocent state of objectivity but reflects my goals, interests and political orientations, and is also mediated by a vast variety of institutional mechanisms. On the other hand, even if scholarship could draw a perfect one-to-one map of social context, there is not one autochthonous authentic essence that can be pinned down as 'Hinduism'. The tradition is not the eternal singular, monolithic entity proposed by scripturalism, but a much more fluid, oscillating set of discourses and practices.

Thus, in a skewed Levinasian sense, facing-up to the god-image calls into question many of the scriptural assumptions by which Religious Studies has operated. As Levinas writes: '[The face-to-face] involves a calling into question of oneself, a critical attitude which is itself produced in face of the other and under his authority'. (1969: 81). Accordingly, facing up to Bhairava's image challenges many of the scriptural assumptions that have 'Booked' Hinduism. These scriptural presuppositions include the disjunctured oppositions between meaning and reality, truth and falsity, word and referent, world and thought, mind and body, and immediacy and mediation. Even more to the point, the stone god, by indicating the necessity of material signs for signification, calls into question the very foundation upon which scripturalist theories of religion are founded. The stone god demonstrates that religion does not have to be ideal, uncreated, and anchored in books, but can be centred on human-made deities grounded in the material.

Second, concentrating on everyday religion suggests that Hinduism is not so much a 'thing' that can be essentialised in scripture, or even in god-images. Hinduism should be thought of as an ongoing style of mediating and practice. Yet, these narratives cannot be captured between the limits of a front and back cover of a book, anchored by a scriptural divine. They narrate a heterogeneous, mutable, interactive, and open-ended space where meaning is inscribed in material signs, between nodes, and between readers. As such, Hinduism is not so much a meta-narrative as a Möbius strip: narrations within narrations. It is mediation all the way down. To give an example, take the pedagogical text the *Hitopadeśa*. This is a set of animal fables, like the *Panchatantra*, which create morality tales. The text is a nested set of tales, 'Chicken-Lickin' stories in which characters in the tale tell the other stories in which still other characters tell other stories (Doniger 1984: 209). As such, there is no original (no Ur-text), only redactions that recount each other.

In conclusion, the danger of scriptural mediation is *not* that Hinduism is being interpreted through non-Hindu categories, that is, that its 'autochthonous nature' is being 'polluted'. Instead, the danger lies in the fact that scripturalism pries the material god-image out of its localised context, and supplements it to an abstract category. Such scriptural mediation makes it possible to conjoin groups of marginalised people, objects, and practices who have nothing else in

common except that they are presumed not to understand themselves and their situation. This fictitious unity of oppression as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, becomes an 'evil' to be found and eradicated. Through this sleight-of-hand, gods such as Bhairava are defaced. He is no longer situated in his own domain of social practices, but becomes a signifier of often-dangerous political agendas – orientalism and Hindutva being only the most obvious – which are legitimised through abstract categories. It is for this reason one is forced to ask: not only who is telling what? But, as in the *Hitopadeśa*, who is telling whom? And as the high school student's pointing to the stone-god indicates, one must question not only the content of these tales, but also the politics by which they mediate the material.

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