

## **IDOL WORSHIP or DEITY WORSHIP?**

Ram was born in a traditional *Madhva* Brahmin family and he grew up watching his grandfather worshipping the *saligrama shila* (a round black stone) promptly everyday early in the morning, offering tulasi leaves with water to the stone and then perform an elaborate offering to a six inch brass statue of Krishna, a replica of the form of Krishna as in Udupi. At the age of ten years, he was initiated into the worship too, by *upanayanam*, a ceremony where he was awarded a sacred thread. From that day, he would perform *sandhyavandanam*, three times a day and would also worship the Krishna statue and saligrama shila. This routine was ingrained into him as the entire family would eat their daily meal only after offering *naivedya* to that Krishna statue. As he was taught and expected to follow all these from his very childhood, he never questioned any of these methods. He was a brilliant student and also very hard working, and he always stood first in his class. Eventually he topped his school in his twelfth standard, got a very good ranking in CET. He got admission into one of the top engineering colleges in Bangalore. For the first time in his life, Ram had to live away from his family, in the huge city of Bangalore.

His parents accompanied him and got him admitted in the college hostel and left to their native place. Soon Ram got into his daily routine of *sandhyavandanam* and began worshipping the small six inch Krishna statue he had brought with him every day. However his roommates and friends started making fun of him. Nevertheless, Ram continued his worship out of deference to his family tradition. The ridicule and pulling his leg intensified however, and he was becoming more and more disturbed. Also of late he was developing different tastes like his friends, to watch movies, play computer games, and chat on Facebook and however much he tried; he could not squeeze enough time for his studies, fun activities and this worship as well. His roommate Shyam started discouraging him about his daily pooja.

One day when Ram got up relatively later than his normal routine at 6.45AM and got ready for his daily pooja (as he slept late after watching the latest movie on Shyam's laptop), Shyam became quite irritated and again started discouraging Ram about his pooja:

**Shyam:** Why do you have to ring that nasty loud bell everyday so early in the morning for that doll and disturb everyone who is sleeping? Your Lord is not in that doll after all! If God is all powerful, he will listen to your prayers even if you tell them in your mind, that doll is not your God! God is everywhere Ram!

**Ram:** You don't understand Shyam. I have been trained from childhood to do this pooja. I just don't feel good without performing my daily pooja. My day would be very bad. It is part of my daily routine. Well, I can't answer your questions of whether God is this doll or not, and I do believe God is everywhere, but I just have to do all this as it is in my family tradition.

**Shyam:** Family traditions indeed! I tell you what Ram! You are still stuck to those primitive age old meaningless traditional rituals in this fast paced 21<sup>st</sup> century! These rituals won't get you anywhere far! Come on man! There are so many things to achieve in life! How can you waste so much time everyday in doing these silly meaningless rituals in front of some doll for so long! I too believe in God, but God helps those who make their own destiny! You don't have to do these elaborate rituals every day! Besides being an engineer, you should develop scientific temper. Can you scientifically or logically explain the need for all these rituals? How can you think that this mere doll can be God receiving your worship?

**Ram:** Well, Shyam actually the questions you have raised are valid and in fact they are my own questions as well. I never really asked them out of fear of displeasing my family. But as you said being a student of science, I should not be following all these blindly. I agree already there are enough to study and also so many things to enjoy in life. We hardly have time for this daily ritualistic worship. I think Shyam I will stop these rituals for the next few days and see how my life would be.

And thus Ram did give up his daily worship and became absorbed in the routine of a 'normal' college guy's life like all his friends. However, in his heart there was a guilt bugging him about having given up the daily pooja and *sandhyavandanam* that he performed without break for ten long years since childhood.

One day Ram, Shyam and his friends planned for a weekend outing to the newly opened 'ORION Mall' next to the 'ISKCON Bangalore' temple, just to hang out on the Saturday evening. They left hostel by 4PM and reached there by 5.30PM, and some of them shopped in the mall, while most of them just window shopped. After spending so long time in the mall they realized that they hadn't much money left with them, and they were hungry! Shyam came up with brilliant idea!

**Shyam:** "Hey, it's just 7.45PM now. Why don't we go to ISKCON? It's just a stone's throw from here! It's an excellent hang out place guys! I had been there once at 8PM. They have that funny song and dance, all those young pujaris jumping up and down with their ponytails, and also encouraging us to dance! It's fun, such fun I haven't experienced even in a disco! Besides that, they do give that delicious kichdi as much as we want! And for free! Come on, let's go!"

**Ram:** Hey Shyam!? Is that you talking of going to a TEMPLE!? Oh come on! You were the one telling me to be scientific and that God is not in some mere doll, and yet you want us to go to a temple today? Whatever happened to you man!?

**Shyam:** No Ram, it's not that I am interested in those dolls or statues, but the ambience is just wonderful there. Besides I love their free food and the song and dance. I was just talking about having fun, after all! And somehow, I become amazed whenever I hear of the profiles of those saffron *pujaris* there! Most of them are engineers from IITs and NITs and some Doctors as well! I just can't understand what made these guys give up this wonderful life to become monks! Maybe they did find some answers in life. There must be some meaning in those rituals after all if these IIT guys are ready to practice it giving up everything else! Maybe we can catch up with some Swami there and find answers to these questions as well.

**Amit:** Guys! Let's not waste time, it's already 8PM! You spoke of some song and dance! I don't want to miss the fun, and that delicious food! Let's rush there!

And they reached the temple just in time and had a great time dancing in the 8.15PM's Shayana arati. They were amazed to see not only the *pujaris* but even some youth just like them, dressed in dhoti and kurta, dancing away in joy in front of the Lord! Amused, they joined in the dancing party. The arati finally came to a close when the altar was closed. Ram, Shyam and his friends were getting ready to head to the prasadam counter, when Rishi, the BASICS Foundation volunteer caught up with them.

**Rishi:** Hare Krishna! Can I speak to you for sometime please?

**Shyam:** Yes Sir. But we were getting late and we wanted to have that kichdi.

**Rishi:** (chuckling) Oh don't worry about that. I will help you get a good meal. Tell me where you are from guys and what are you doing? Are you students? I am Rishi; I work for IBM as a Senior Software Engineer and also am a volunteer of BASICS Foundation, an ISKCON Bangalore's initiative for youth programs.

**Ram:** Oh that's kind of you Sir. We are all students studying Engineering. We just had come to hang out in the newly opened ORION mall next to ISKCON and thought we would make a visit here before we go. But Sir you mentioned that you are a software engineer, and yet you say you are a volunteer in a temple!? Why would an educated young man like you believe in these rituals and idol worship and spend time in a temple on a weekend?

**Rishi:** Good question, your name?

**Ram:** I am Ram, this is Shyam and that is Amit. We are eager to know how so many youngsters like you are spending time in such blind beliefs and in idol worship.

**Rishi:** It is neither blind belief nor unscientific to be following these Ram. In fact as Indian youth we must be aware of and should practice the principles of our glorious culture.

**Ram:** Oh culture, tradition! Don't tell me Rishi Sir! I myself am a born Madhva Brahmin and was religiously following all the daily rituals until recently. But I just don't seem to find any meaning in them. What is so glorious in these meaningless rituals which have no scientific basis? Take for example, the worship of these dolls! Is it not so childish to worship some imaginary idols and spend so much valuable time like some nursery children? Come on, we are adults! Can you tell me Rishi Sir, what is the basis of this idol worship?

**Rishi:** I can understand how you would feel doing all that daily pooja without understanding the meaning behind it. It is rather unfortunate that although being Indians we have been so brainwashed to look down upon our own culture and traditions. The British education and now the Western education has completely minimized the value to our culture by demeaning and hiding the original intent of Vedic culture and sometimes misinterpreting and disrupting the real meaning of Vedas. Take for example, the word you used for the *arcā vigraha aradhana*, it is to be called 'Deity Worship' in English and not 'idol worship'. The term Deity means 'GOD', because it comes from the word 'dios' which means 'form of a person', but idol comes from word 'idolus' which means 'an imaginary form'. The early Indologists such as Max Mueller appointed by our colonial masters (British) deliberately misinterpreted some significant words of Sanskrit such as *vigraha* to mean 'idol' rather than 'Deity' and hence make Vedas look primitive and uncivilized to the British educated children and youth, so they could feel their own culture to be inferior and British culture as superior. The *vigraha aradhana* though, is most scientific and is on a solid basis and hence to be called 'Deity Worship' as translated by Srila Prabhupada, Founder Acharya of ISKCON.

**Shyam:** Interesting analysis of history of British India. It's amazing how they have brainwashed us to think British way even today. But it still doesn't solve the question of how idol... er... sorry, 'Deity Worship' is scientific. After all as we can see, these are but metal or stone statues. Could you please elaborate?

**Rishi:** Srila Prabhupada explains, "Idol means your imagination. And Deity is not imaginary. Deity is installed by the authorized person and it is worshiped according to authorized methods. So it is not idol. Idol worship, you imagine something and, some doll or idol, and do in your own way, that is idol worship Srila Prabhupada gives a wonderful example to explain this point. We all do remember from our childhood the red colored 'Letter Box' which would be emptied by the Postman right? Of course nowadays we have only e-mails, but earlier most of written communication would be through the post and letters isn't it?

**Ram:** Yes, so what's the relevance of that now?

**Rishi:** Srila Prabhupada explains, "Just like a small letter-box, it is a Post Office. But for your facility, it is a box. It is Post Office. Actually it is Post Office. You put the letter and will go 10,000 miles away. How it goes?

**Shyam:** It goes to the GPO and then it is dispatched.

**Rishi:** That's alright, because it is authorized. Therefore the work is being done. You don't think "I have put it into a small box." It has gone to the Post Office and work is going on. If you imitate a small box in your... write simply the same letter box, red. That will not go. That will stay there for millions of years. But any old box, or an imitation which we may find somewhere but which is not authorized by the post office, will not do the work. Similarly, God has an authorized representation in the Deity form, which is called *arcā-vigraha*. This *arcā-vigraha* is an incarnation of the

Supreme Lord. God will accept service through that form. The Lord is omnipotent, all-powerful; therefore, by His incarnation as arcā-vigraha He can accept the services of the devotee, just to make it convenient for the man in conditioned life.”

**Ram:** But why we cannot see God as Deity? Why it appears to us just like a stone or metal?

**Rishi:** Now, we may see the Deity to be no more than wood or stone, but that is due only to our defective vision. The Lord cannot be seen with our blunt material senses. One has to purify his eyes by seeing through the vision of the scriptures and by rendering devotional service to the Lord. This is the process for developing our spiritual vision so that we will be able to see the Supreme Lord. God has an authorized representation in His Deity form, who is an incarnation of God and who will accept the devotee's sincere service. Although God is unknowable and unlimited. He mercifully appears in a form just suitable to our vision, in the form of the Deity. So the Deity is not an idol but the all-spiritual form of the Lord Himself. That is the all-powerful nature of the Lord.

So the *arcā vigraha aradhana* that is performed in temples or at homes is not by our imagination, but it is Deity worship because it is done according to the directions of Vedic scriptures and Lord is invoked into the metal, stone or wooden form. Hence Lord is present directly in that form and it is not an idol but a Deity.

**Shyam:** Sir I think this is a very large topic to discuss.

**Rishi:** Yes. If you would like to know more please read this book ‘Beyond Birth and Death.’ This book, based on Bhagavad Gita, authored by Srila Prabhupada gives all answers to your questions about our Vedic Culture. My sincere request to you is to resume your daily worship and also add the process of meditation recommended for this age and time, namely Mantra Meditation as ‘Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare. Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare’. In fact you can form a circle of friends together every evening and perform this meditation in ‘mantra meditation circle’ in your college hostel. You can also spend reading this book ‘Beyond Birth and Death’ for five minutes together at that time. I would be happy to come every week and guide you by clarifying your doubts about our Vedic culture and help you appreciate and practice the principles mentioned in our culture. In fact you would be surprised to know that through BASICS Foundation, there are already ‘mantra meditation circles’ happening in 22 engineering colleges of Bangalore every day. Also there is a ‘Vedic Science Club’ where the members learn more about Vedic Science by attending sessions as part of a ‘Vedic Thinker Course’ every weekend for 1 hour. You can also join this club and start having meetings in your college. I will be happy to come and guide you all, if you would want it. And guess what? The best part is that, I will provide you with a week-long stock of prasadam for those who attend ‘mantra meditation circle’ everyday and on every ‘Vedic Science Club’ meeting; I will bring some special and delicious prasadam for all of you to enjoy! So what do you say?

**Ram, Shyam, Amit:** WOW! That’s just wonderful Rishi Sir! That’s so great! So kind of you to take so much time out and trouble for our sake. We will definitely gather our other friends also and will start off right away. But why are you taking so much trouble Sir?

**Rishi:** Oh don’t worry! It is all by the mercy of Srila Prabhupada that I could understand and practice all these in my life. It has brought about such great change in my life. It’s only my small attempt to give to others this immense benefit too. It is part of my duty as a volunteer of BASICS Foundation. Of course, there is a spiritual selfishness in me doing this activity too! Lord Krishna says in Bhagavad Gita, “There is no servant in this world more dear to Me, nor will there ever be; than one who explains to others about Me.” So I want to be the dear most servant of GOD by doing this service of speaking about Him. And what more? It doesn’t cost me anything, but gives me immense pleasure.

**Shyam:** Rishi Sir! One last question. You were earlier mentioning about getting delicious prasadam...

**Rishi:** Oh sorry! Come let’s go to prasadam hall and have dinner. Of course, don’t worry I will be getting good varieties of prasadam for you every week.

**Shyam:** Oh not that, Rishi Sir! What is this prasadam? Is it food offered to idol, er... sorry Deity? But we see that although we offer food to the Deity he doesn’t eat it anyway? So why do we do this ritual?

**Rishi:** Good question Shyam. In our next meeting at Vedic Science Club we shall discuss this topic, “Why do we offer food to God, who doesn’t eat it anyway?”

*(They exchange mobile numbers, and agree to meet soon and part)*