

## Review

*Hindu Images and their Worship with Special Reference to Vaiṣṇavism: A Philosophical-Theological Inquiry*, by Julius J. Lipner. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017. 260pp. £120 (hb), £36.99 (pb). ISBN: 978-1-138-29113-3 (hb), ISBN: 978-0-367-42706-1 (pb).

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Image worship is one of the key features within Hinduism and has been an enormous area of study. This is not just owing to its ancient heritage, but also due to its regional variations and its proclivity to constantly reinvent itself. It would therefore be germane to say that it is a somewhat daunting task to take up its study. Since the time of the foundational text of T. A. Gopinatha Rao's *The Elements of Hindu Iconography* in the early years of the twentieth century, many monographs have appeared on the subject. Some have been specific micro-studies on a particular iconographic type and others have provided a synoptic overview of different images. Julius Lipner's monograph *Hindu Images and their Worship with Special Reference to Vaiṣṇavism* is a welcome addition to the field. Rarely has there been a study of images from a philosophical and theological point of view. Besides analysing the philosophy surrounding Hindu image worship, this book examines such areas as issues of art in the Indus civilization, the origin of the image right from the Vedic period, or unique features of Hindu images—their multiple heads and limbs, the Sāṃkhya paradigm with regard to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Śaiva Tantra as well as popular Śaktism. Lipner's book is, in fact, almost an embarrassment of riches as it supplies a plethora of useful historiographical discussions around age-old problematic issues haunting Indological studies, such as methodology, secularism and objectivity.

Lipner has used mainly Sanskrit sources. The book is divided into two parts with four chapters in each part. The first part sets out the functional methodology used, that is one 'of respect'. In the next few chapters the author explicitly discusses image worship, among other things, in a specific text, that is, Yāmuna's *Āgamaprāmāṇya*. This is a tenth-century Śrīvaiṣṇava text, probably the earliest systematic attempt available to legitimate image

worship. The subsequent chapters in this part, among other topics, discuss the foundations of Hindu image worship followed by the Sāṃkhya paradigm.

Part II is extremely engaging, with chapters on the Hindu *dharma* and the making of images, and theological considerations of the form and the meaning of Hindu images. It focuses on the rationale underlying the formation of the image from a devotional point of view. There is also, in addition, the feature of multiple heads and limbs and the Abrahamic faiths which tend to condemn it. Plus, the charges of idolatry and a review to start a greater degree of mutual understanding and respect in the field of religion in today's world.

This portion has the five illustrations of the text. Remarkably, though the book's focus is supposed to be on Vaiṣṇavism, barring one, the rest are Śaivic in nature. Though the discussion around the philosophy is present, one would have also preferred, albeit briefly, the foundational myth or the *raison d'être* of the image to be included. A case in point is the *ardhanārīśvara*: what was the reason for such a form?

Studying the aesthetics of Hindu religious art, Lipner delves deep into the *rasa* theory. This includes the psychology of *rasa*, its constituent parts, and its effect as transaction, as interaction and as being expressive of socio-moral norms. It is in the erotic *rasa* that Pārvatī and Śiva images are discussed succinctly:

However, it is with the image of Pārvatī rather than of her lord that we are concerned here. For we have in this stylized figure such a sublime blend of the *śānta* and *śrīgāra* *rasas*, the one perfectly tempering the other, that any display of vulgar eroticism, or of a blatant voluptuousness, is kept firmly at bay.

(p. 184)

Equally captivating is the part dealing of the significance of nudity in the Sanskrit imaginary, with special reference to the domain of the sacred. The writer elaborates and compares with Abrahamic faiths. The conclusion drawn is that it is the context that plays a leading role in determining aesthetic judgements concerning the portrayal of nudity. Nudity is discussed with episodes from Kṛṣṇa mythology and Śaiva mythology as well as episodes from the *Mahābhārata*.

This is a thorough book that will hold the interest of anyone who wants to probe deep into art. It engages one in an exploratory conversation, in fact at times one is astonished at the informal style adopted in an otherwise very erudite scholarly text. However, I have a slight quarrel with one aspect. Most of the sentences in this book are long, going on for five to six lines at least. This can be tedious and cumbersome for the reader. On page 95 a single sentence goes on for some fifteen lines; clearly some sharp editing could have handled this issue.

The overall texture of Lipner's book is one of solid academic rigour with many ideas twirling in a centrifugal way. Attentive repetitive reading is

advised as sometimes it gets a bit excessively discursive. The chapters are buttressed by helpful, learned and detailed notes.

Just like Lipner's previous books, here we witness an impressive grasp over Hindu religions and their academic study. The minutiae which one encounters are not just useful but extremely thought-provoking. This book will be of abiding interest to scholars of theology, Indian philosophy, art, iconography and aesthetics.