EDITORIAL

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The four articles in this issue are all based on fieldwork, in places where the authors have been intimately engaged in the life that they describe. In each case, the description is not only synchronic, but involves the past, in the form of personal histories, movements of population, changes of leadership, and changes in prevailing ideas of what is due to the gods. The first is urban, the fruit of many walks through Varanasi, a city sanctified by the personal visits of Śiva and Viṣṇu, where the sacred in many forms is encountered at every turn. The other three are rural, from places where the sacred can be embodied in the products of the land: grains, herbs, fruits, coconuts, milk, cowdung, pottery, cobras, and the soil itself. Two of the four articles report on work done in the Ganges basin, and two on work done in rural Tamil Nadu. Each of them evokes interesting reflections on the relations between pan-Hindu ideas and practices and more or less local traditions, and on the relations between masculine and feminine, both human and divine.

In 'The Life of Rāmānandī Centres in Varanasi', an Italian scholar, Daniela Bevilacqua, retraces the footsteps of two Indian anthropologists, Surajit Sinha and Baidyanath Saraswati, to find how these centres have changed in the half-century since they surveyed them. While Varanasi is often associated with Śiva, it is also a stronghold of Vaiṣṇavism, and particularly of the Rāmānandī ascetics, whose founder Rāmānand is historically obscure, but remembered as the guru of Kabir. Two of these centres use online

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communication and have webpages; most rely on local reputation, and some are hard to find for anyone who does not already know them. An interesting feature of this tradition is that, while there is an ideal of the feminine as the proper condition for worship (as in the better-known Caitanya tradition), women Rāmānandī devotees take masculine names, followed by the title *dās*, not *dāsī*, on the explicit grounds that gender has no place in relation to the divine—with the implicit assumption that the default gender is the masculine.

'Karāha Pūjan: A Folk-Worship of Kṛṣṇa in Uttar Pradesh' is a study by an Indian scholar, Prabha Shankar Dwivedi, of a little-known practice which is both Vaiṣṇava and Śākta. The central figure, the *bhagat* (a form of *bhakta* 'devotee'), is a man of the Āhīr (cowherd) or the Gaḍariyā (shepherd) community who has been chosen by the Goddess, often violently through mental distress or disease. This initial possession is involuntary, but it can lead to a period of apprenticeship which qualifies the man as a *bhagat.* He can then be engaged by a *yajmān* to perform the *pūjan* on an appointed day, when he will invoke Kṛṣṇa and become possessed by him, after which he will be possessed by the Goddess and Kṛṣṇa in turn. In this state he can undergo exposure to extreme heat, and give voice to predictions and other utterances made by the possessing deity, which are valued by those attending the ritual. Dwivedi shows that the ritual has some features of Tantrism, but the word *tantra* is applied to it locally as a term of disparagement rather than as a precise categorization.

'Kannimār Shrines and Iconography: A Set of Tamil Folk Goddesses Interpreted in a Pan-Indian Context' is the outcome of over 50 years' observation of Tamil folk culture by the Canadian anthropologist Brenda Beck. Her article is suggestive of many themes, including the role of the female as mediator in family relationships, in mythology, and in ritual. The Kannimār are the seven virgin mothers of Murugan, Skanda or Kārttikeya; but simply to equate them with the *sapta mātṛkā*s would be to ignore important differences. The youngest of them also has a role in a local oral epic, where she is the younger sister of a pair of twin heroes. In the course of the story she restores them to life, conveying the dependence of the masculine on the feminine which is a feature of Tamil culture. This epic has been made into a video animation which Beck herself facilitated, but which is the work of a local artist nurtured in the folk tradition. This richly illustrated article discusses several temples in which the Kannimār appear as a row of identical figures. They can also appear in aniconic form in open-air shrines; or the worshipper can make them out of cowdung.

Do-it-yourself images, of cowdung or other handy materials—stones, weeds, even tin cans—are the theme of Singaporean anthropologist Indira Arumugam's article 'Touchable Gods: Improvised Icons, Irreverent Rituals and Intimate Kinship with Deities in Rural Tamil Nadu'. Arumugam describes how objects which on certain occasions are worshipped by gatherings of

devotees, when decoration, *pūjā* and *ārati* make it clear that they are sacred, can be treated the rest of the time in casual, even irreverent ways. She finds an affinity between this attitude to gods, especially tutelary gods, and an attitude to kin: they are always there, but you don't always take much notice of them, or you can treat them familiarly or even make fun of them, but you remember your obligations to them when you need their help. It is even possible to make fun of a medium who (like the *bhagat* in our second article) is possessed by and embodies a deity. Nevertheless, possession is the most intimate relationship between devotee and deity; as Beck puts it in the previous article, it is a more powerful experience than handing a coconut to a priest.

Both of these articles on Tamil culture explore the relationship between dealings with the gods and human kinship. They also both touch on a tendency in recent decades towards formal worship, architecturally designed temples, textually prescribed rituals, and brahmin priests. Such worship is subject to rules which, Arumugam points out, are human constructions—though Purāṇas and other texts frame them as prescriptions delivered by gods. But this gentrifying tendency can be resisted—not by folklore enthusiasts, but by the gods themselves. In Arumugam's village, a lineage deity, speaking through a medium, vehemently refused permission to build him a temple. Beck relates how a temple was modernized by moving an image of Bhadrakālī to a less prominent position and replacing it with a less fierce-looking one. But the goddess showed her displeasure, through misfortunes attending the family that controls and funds the temple, so they had to restore the old image to her original place and move the new one.

All of these articles convey the authors' deep familiarity with their subjects. Two of them use the word *idol* to refer to an image of a deity. We wondered whether to ask the authors to change it, on the grounds that the word is pejorative and is avoided by many scholars of religion. But then we considered that if it is pejorative, this is only because the English language has been dominated for centuries by an anti-idolatrous culture. One of the tools of this domination, in South Asia as elsewhere, has been the King James Bible, where the word *idol*, like its cognate *idolatry*, always appears in contexts conveying condemnation. Hence it has become the unmentionable I-word, while *image* (unless preceded by *graven*, as in Exodus 20.4 and elsewhere) and *icon* do not carry the same derogatory implications. But a word deemed pejorative can be reclaimed, as a gesture of rejection of the values that made it pejorative. We leave it to our authors to use this word or not, as they wish.