

VISHWAKARMA: THE GOD OF ENGINEERS

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(English Version)

Bengal's Vishwakarma puja is the only one that is celebrated every year on one fixed date of the English or Gregorian solar calendar: the 17th of September. This is rather strange, as artisans and industrial workers all over the northern and western states of India worship their tools on a lunar date, Goverdhan Puja day, the day just after Diwali. In the south, however, they do the same along with their Saraswati puja called Ayudha pujan, which is invariably on our Maha-Navami day. Bengalis are different not only in choosing a special day for their god of tools, but in also deciding to fly kites on this day whereas all over India, the day reserved for kite-flying is several months away, on Pous Sankranti, when millions come out with their kites and several national and international competitions are held. The cold breeze in mid-January that others love so much could be one reason why Bengalis stay away from rooftops. After all, Bengali children are constantly taught to tie thick mufflers over their ears and also tightly around our necks as soon as the temperature drops below twenty degrees celsius. Let us also not forget that Bengalis love to be different from other states, whether in their political choices on the ground or in flying kites in the skies. But why was this date and deity chosen?

Most Hindus have an incorrigible habit of rushing to the Vedas for every religious matter and managing to locate any small mention, after which they jump to the conclusion that the concerned deity or the festival is from the Vedic period and has surely continued for thousands of years, since then. We make this error with Saraswati puja which began in Bengal in the late 19th century, after the systematic spread of modern education in the post Macaulay-Adam phase, because if the Vedic goddess had really been so popular earlier, we would have numerous Saraswati

temples and corroborative historical records. It is my submission that Vishwakarma puja in Bengal is also a modern, post-colonial tradition and we can go over the evidence.

Let us first examine his iconography that still varies a lot. As he is mentioned in the Rig Veda, he is imagined as someone like Brahma, with a long white beard. Vedic Aryans, however, had no temples or pandals as they did not worship man-made images, but later portrayals of this deity show him with one face or three or four. It is said that he needed many heads to look at all his creations from different angles. He has four hands and sometimes he has many more. The Veda describe him as "our father, our creator, who every place doth know and every creature. He builds the universe. He is of all hands, and of all feet." Vishwakarma rides on five white elephants, while in some places, he is seen on one black one. To complicate matters, the old bearded Vishwakarma is also portrayed on a throne with one foot on his thigh and a swan near his feet. But by the time, he reaches modern Bengal on just one black elephant, he is transformed into a handsome clean-shaven young man who has a neat moustache like Kartik. It is interesting that the sharp British observer of Indian festivals, MM Underhill, had noticed exactly a century ago that "he is worshipped as a pitcher, before which are placed the tools and implements of work." We do not have clear records of when exactly his worship began in modern Bengal, because the earlier narratives of Wilson, Wilkins, Crooke and Murdoch do not mention this festival, though they noted even minor deities like Ghentu, Sitala and Shasti. It is obvious that the present-day puja must have emerged only after factories came up in this region, otherwise how could owners agree on a holiday that is fixed in the English calendar, based on a ritual mention that Vishwakarma is to be worshipped in the Shukla-paksha of Bhadra?

This is not to say that there was no worship of the old Vishwakarma anywhere else in the past several centuries, and we do find his mention in the final version of the Mahabharata of the 3rd or 4th century after Christ. He is described as 'the lord of the arts, the executor of a thousand crafts, the carpenter of the gods, the

most eminent of artisans, the fashioner of all ornaments." He thus became the god of five big occupational castes, ie, carpenters, blacksmiths, metal workers, goldsmiths and stone masons. Drivers, electricians, mechanics, factory workers and such other post-industrial professions had, of course, no option but to come up with a more modern form, through the younger Vishwakarma that Bengal introduced. In the settled society in which the Mahabharata was composed and finalised at least two millennia after the Rig Veda, his role is certainly clearer and the earlier overlap of identity and functions between Vishwamitra and Tvastar was tackled, and the occasional confusion with him and other Vedic gods like Indra, Agni or Surya removed. In the great tradition of the Indo-European people, the Vedic Vishwamitra was quite akin to the ancient Greek god of craftsmen, Hephaestus, the son of Zeus. He also resembled the Roman god of fire and artisans, Vulcan, from whom we get the word 'vulcanised' for heat-treated objects, like rubber.

The Puranas that followed the Epics elaborated on Vishwakarma's genius in the Satya Yuga when he created Swargalok and in the Treta Yuga when his fabulous marvel, the golden city of Lanka, was acquired by Ravana. He then constructed Krishna's capital of Dwarka in the next era, Dwapar, and was the architect who converted Khandava-prastha into the glittering Indraprastha of the Pandavas. So perfect were the illusions that he created in the palace there that Duryodhan was mesmerised and fell inadvertently into a pool, which provoked Draupadi's instantaneous laughter and the dangerous remark that "the blind man's son is blind as well". As we know, the consequences were terrible and therefore, the younger Vishwakarma of Bengal leaves grandiose architecture to promoter-companies and appears quite content with the worship of lesser mortals.