

Tree trunk to stone to human face—how deity worship evolved in Hinduism

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New Delhi: Stones of various shapes and sizes decorated with garlands and vermilion, a tree trunk, and a silver snake idol. These were some of the photos displayed by Jawhar Sircar, former CEO of Prasar Bharati, at his recent presentation in Delhi. He was explaining the changing nature of worship in Hinduism and the centralisation of the religion.

The over 90-minute long presentation, titled *Aniconic to the Iconic: Cult of Dharmaraj – The Folk Form of Hinduism*, focused on the changing forms of Hindu gods—from a tree trunk to a stone, an animal, and finally a human face. Sircar explained how the evolution and transformation of a deity in Hinduism also alter the ways in which it is worshipped.

“You can’t see a single hilltop in India that doesn’t have a temple. These are some of the common narratives that we come across. But the most common forms of worship are the tree trunks in India,” said public intellectual Sircar at the India International Centre on 4 March.

Tree-worship is a practice in Hinduism that has existed since ancient times. “Hinduism actually rests upon something prior to its organisation, called dendrolatry worship,” he said.

With a room full of intellectuals, journalists, students, linguists, and senior citizens, Sircar showed another slide capturing the example of tree-worship—the Siris tree, which is considered sacred in West Bengal.

“This particular tree (Siris) became the original symbol of worship in Bengal, and it is also famous for its association with snakes,” he said, adding that after tree trunks, people started worshipping snakes, marking the second stage of worship in Hinduism.

Stages of worship

Sircar defined the different stages of worship in Hinduism, with the first one being the worship of an object, such as a stone or a tree trunk. Then the second stage involved the worship of a form, specifically snakes.

The evolution of worship went from aniconic to iconic. While the former was symbolic and abstract, the latter meant creation of icons such as human or animal forms. Worship progressed to its final stage where deities took on human faces and were placed in temples.

Highlighting the evolution of worship, Sircar talked about goddess Chandi who is revered in West Bengal. “She was worshipped as a stone almost two or three thousand years ago, and later had two eyes painted on the stone. Now, she is depicted with a full human face and is worshipped in temples under various names all over India. Some of the common names for her are Padma Chandi, Kumbha Chandi, Mahamaya, Rondo Chandi, Chandika, and Abhaya.”

“She (goddess Chandi) has been iconised. From being a symbol to becoming an icon, this transformation has occurred over a period of years,” Sircar added.

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Transformation of Dharmaraj

Another example of an aniconic to iconic shift is West Bengal's folk deity Dharma Thakur, or Dharmaraj. He was worshiped in the form of stones and gradually started appearing as an anthropomorphic deity.

Sircar said that when he thought the final stage of worship was the humanisation of objects, he encountered another form—stone carvings depicting the human face. “This is a structure of a semi-human image, and the king of it became Bengal's folk deity, Dharmaraj.”

The influence of pan-Indian religious movements such as the Bhakti movement also became visible in the way Indians worshiped. Deities such as Dharma Thakur began to find their place within the broader group of Hindu gods. This shift reflects a larger pattern of religious centralisation and the interaction between indigenous folk beliefs and Brahmanical orthodoxy.

Sircar explained that while much has changed in the way Dharma Thakur is worshipped, there are still some things that remain the same, like worshiping under a tree and the rituals being performed by both male and female priests.

(Edited by Aamaan Alam Khan)