

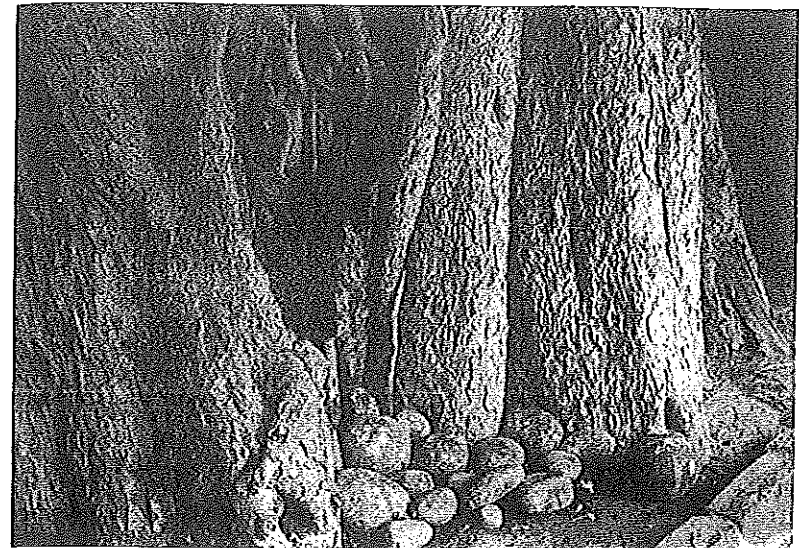
## CHAPTER 2

## The Nature of the Hindu Image

### A. The Aniconic and the Iconic Image

THE IMAGE which Hindus come to "see" in a temple or an open-air shrine may be anthropomorphic in appearance, albeit with fantastic features which may little resemble any *anthropos* of flesh and blood, or it may be theriomorphic, like Hanumān with the body of a monkey or Gaṇeśa with the head of an elephant. On the other hand, it may have no discernible "form" at all; it may be a rock outcropping or a smooth stone. In exploring the nature of images in the Hindu context we must make a further distinction between the iconic and the aniconic image. For our purposes, the iconic image is one which is representational; it has a recognizable "likeness" to its mythic subject. The Latin *icon* or the Greek *eikon* means "likeness" or "image" and calls to mind the icons of Orthodox Christianity which show a likeness of Christ or Mary. By contrast, the aniconic images are those symbolic forms which, although they refer to a deity, do not attempt any anthropomorphic form or any representational likeness. The plain cross, for example, is aniconic, as is the *liṅga* of Śiva or the natural stone *śālagrāma* of Viṣṇu.

India has ancient traditions of both iconic and aniconic image-making. The terracotta female "deities" of the Indus Valley, for example, are certainly full-bodied representations of the female form, although it is not clear how they were utilized ritually. On the other hand, the Vedic ritual tradition of the Aryan newcomers has generally been seen as aniconic, for there is no evidence of images or of permanent temples or sanctuaries. Vedic religion consisted primarily of domestic and kingly sacrificial rites centered around the sacred fire. The fire was both a focus and a vehicle of ritual activity. The construction of the Vedic fire altar was the symbolic



Stones daubed with vermilion at the base of a tree

construction of the "image" of the primordial creator, Prajāpati, and therefore was also the symbolic construction of the world, which emerged from Prajāpati. The fire has continued to be utilized as an aniconic image of the divine, and it has a central place in many Hindu rites. Although in the Vedic period there is virtually no evidence to indicate the use of iconic images in worship,<sup>44</sup> it is important to note that the Vedic poets were image-makers in another sense: they created vivid images of the gods in their poetry. There was the Sun, the witness of the world with heavenly eye; Agni, with seven red tongues, seven faces, and gleaming hair; and Indra, the warrior, who carried the thunderbolt.

#### The Aniconic Image.

While the fire might be considered an ancient aniconic "image," I want to turn here to the traditions of aniconic imaging that have emerged from the folk traditions of India and continue to have influence all over India today. The most ancient non-Vedic cultus of India was almost certainly aniconic. Stones, natural symbols, and earthen mounds signified the presence of a deity long before the iconic images of the great gods came to occupy the *sancta* of temples

and shrines. Much of India, especially rural India, still designates its local deities in this way, be they *devīs*, *bhairavas*, *yakṣas*, or others. The villager whom the urban artist "discovered" sanctifying a stone with red *kunkum* powder is at home in this tradition.

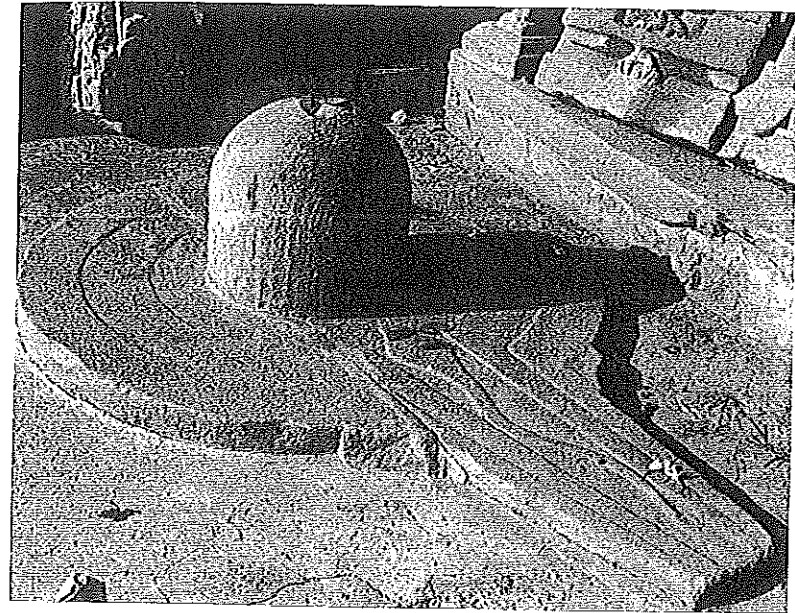
Many of the deities of this ancient cultus were and are local deities, such as the *grāma devatās*, "village deities," or task-specific deities, such as Śītālā who has to do with fever-diseases or the *mātrkāś* ("mothers"), who have to do with birth and childhood. Within their areas of jurisdiction they both cause and cure disease, bring both safety and harm. There are also deities of what Coomaraswamy has called the "life-cult," namely the *yakṣas* and *nāgas*, associated respectively with trees and pools.<sup>45</sup> They too are propitiated as both beneficent and potentially fierce. In their beneficent form they are associated with well-being, and the plump, hospitable Gaṇeśa is one heir of this ancient family of deities.

The form of worship offered to these deities included sprinkling the stone with water, making offerings of flowers, food, cloth and incense, and smearing the stone with various substances. These are essentially the types of rites which became the constituent elements of Hindu *pūjā* in the later tradition. Frequently, however, the ancient rites also included meat and liquor as part of the food offering, and blood as part of the smearing or anointing of the stone. This type of worship, called *bali*, is still offered to certain autochthonous deities. Those who accept sacrificial offerings may sometimes be offered blood, but more frequently the anointing today is with vermilion paint or dry red *kunkum* powder.

In addition to the many local deities whose presence is marked by vermilion smeared stones, there are a number of aniconic images which have attained a prominent place in wider pan-Indian ritual. The śālagrāma stone, for instance, is called a *svarūpa*, a "natural form" of Viṣṇu. This smooth stone, found primarily in the bed of the Gaṇḍakī River in Nepal, is inherently sacred, so it needs no consecration rites when it is installed for worship in a temple or home shrine. For the Hindu, it is Viṣṇu. Similarly, the stones of Mount Govardhan in Vraja, the north Indian homeland of Kṛṣṇa, are known as *svarūpa* forms of Kṛṣṇa, and they are taken from Govardhan to be worshiped in homes and temples all over Vraja and, indeed, all over India.<sup>46</sup>

In the sacred River Narmadā, which runs to the west across

central India, there is another special stone — the *bāṇa liṅga* which is said to be a natural form of Śiva. This smooth, cylindrical stone may be worshiped as Śiva without any rite of consecration. The *bāṇa liṅga* is considered a *svayambhū*, "self-born," *liṅga*.



Śiva liṅga near the riverfront, Kedār ghāt, Banāras

The *liṅga* is perhaps the best known of India's aniconic images. Not all *liṅgas*, of course, are *bāṇa liṅgas*. Most are fashioned by artisans and established in Śiva temples by rites of consecration. It is primarily in this form that Śiva is worshiped in the temples of India.

The *liṅga* is often referred to as a "phallic" symbol, and for those European travelers and missionaries who saw it as an unmistakable "likeness" of the phallus, rather than an aniconic image of Śiva, the *liṅga* evoked the strongest feelings of moral outrage. For example, the Abbé Dubois, an eighteenth century French missionary, described it as "obscene," and wrote, "It is incredible, it is impossible to believe, that in inventing this vile superstition the religious teachers of India intended that the people should render direct

worship to objects the very names of which, among civilized nations, are an insult to decency."<sup>47</sup> It is true that some of the myths of the *liṅga's* origin are myths of castration, and it is true that the earliest *liṅga* image (the Guḍimallam *liṅga*, ca. 100 B.C.E.) is clearly phallic in form.<sup>48</sup> However, the *liṅga* as it is worshiped in India today is more accurately seen as an aniconic image, and the myths of the Śaivas for whom this symbol is significant, see its origins in a magnificent hierophany of a fiery column of light, rather than in a primal act of castration.<sup>49</sup> Those who worship Śiva in the *liṅga* form are consistently appalled to hear it understood as phallic, and again we suspect the interpretations of the "eye of the beholder."

The *liṅga* consists of two parts: the vertical stone shaft, which may be seen as the male component, Śiva, and the circular horizontal base, called a *yonī* or *pīṭha*, which is the female component, Śakti. The wedge-shaped spout is also part of the *yonī* and serves as a drain to carry away the water offerings poured upon the *liṅga*. Together the *liṅga* and *pīṭha* form the Śiva-Śakti symbol of divine unity. The one who is commonly called "Śiva" is seen in the *liṅga* as both Śiva and Śakti, male and female, divine spirit and divine matter, transcendent and immanent, aloof and active. In addition, the shaft of the *liṅga* is often said to have three sections, representing Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva respectively. The word *liṅga* means "mark" or "sign" as well as "phallus," and it is in the former sense, as the sign of Śiva, Mahādeva, the "Great Lord," that the *liṅga* is honored in the *sancta* of the many temples and shrines of India.

There are many other types of aniconic images which present the Hindu worshiper with the deity's token or sign, rather than the deity's face. Of course, the various gods have many emblems by which they can be recognized, including weapons, such as Rāma's bow, and animal mounts, such as Durgā's lion. Here, however, we are concerned with those emblems that are honored as the very embodiment of the god. Among these there is the full pot of water, indicating the presence of the *devī*;<sup>50</sup> the lotiform sun disc, marking the place of the Sun, Sūrya; the footprints, (*pādukās*) showing the presence of Viṣṇu or a saint or, in former days, the Buddha; and the *yantra*, the geometric interlocking triangles signifying the *devī*. Finally, among aniconic images are those embodiments of divinity which are aspects of nature, such as the River Gaṅgā or the River Yamunā; the *tulsī* (baṣil) plant; the *aśvattha* (fig) tree; and the Sun.



Four-Faced *Liṅga*. Fifth century, from Nachna-Kutara in Madhya Pradesh. Photography courtesy of American Institute of Indian Studies, Rāmānagar, Banāras

### The Iconic Image

Just as the term icon conveys the sense of a "likeness," so do the Sanskrit words *pratīkṛti* and *pratimā* suggest the "likeness" of the image to the deity it presents. The common word for such images, however, is *mūrti*, which is defined in Sanskrit as "anything which has definite shape and limits," "a form, body, figure," "an embodiment, incarnation, manifestation,"<sup>751</sup> Thus the *mūrti* is more than a likeness; it is the deity itself taken "form."

The uses of the word *mūrti* in the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā suggest that the form is its essence. The flame is the *mūrti* of fire (Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 1.13), or the year is the *mūrti* of time (Maitri Upaniṣad 6.14). When the formless waters of creation were brooded upon by the creator, form (*mūrti*) emerged (Aitareya Upaniṣad 3.2). It is form (*mūrti*) which takes shape in the womb of the unfathomable Brahman who gives birth to all forms (Bhagavad Gītā 14.3-4). While the word *mūrti* does not commonly mean the icon of a deity in this early period, it is significant that the term itself suggests the congealing of form and limit from that larger reality which has no form or limit. However, the *mūrti* is a body-taking, a manifestation, and is not different from the reality itself.

Another common word for the iconic image is *vigraha*, a word which means "body." As a noun, *vigraha* comes from a verbal root (*vi + grh*) which means "to grasp, to catch hold of." The *vigraha* is that form which enables the mind to grasp the nature of God.

The images of the gods are not "likenesses" of any earthly form. They are fantastic forms, with multiple heads and arms, with blue, green, or vermilion coloring, or with part-animal bodies. They are not intended to "represent" earthly realities, but rather to present divine realities. They stretch the human imagination toward the divine by juxtaposing earthly realities in an unearthly way. To the extent that the *vigraha* is a "body," it is anthropomorphic. But the body with Śiva's three eyes, or Viṣṇu's four arms, or Skanda's six heads is hardly like our own. The things of the world we can see well enough all about us, but for the Indian religious artist the task of image-making was giving shape to those things we cannot readily see.

The iconic image has had a central role in Hindu worship for about two thousand years. Leaving aside the images of the Indus Valley, the first anthropomorphic images were those of the stout

*yakṣas* and voluptuous *yakṣis*, whose worship constituted the prevailing popular cultus of India.<sup>52</sup> It is not surprising that the images of such "life-cult" deities — who were and who remain most intimately involved in the vital concerns of birth and growth, sickness and death — should be among the first fashioned in stone by craftsmen, beginning in the Mauryan period in the third century B. C. E.<sup>53</sup>

In the first century C. E., the Buddha — previously represented by aniconic symbols such as his footprints — came to be depicted in an anthropomorphic image. This happened both in the Hellenistic school of art which developed in northwest India at the Asian crossroads called Gandhāra and in the religious center of Mathurā in central north India. In Gandhāra, the Buddha's form was Greco-Roman in style. In Mathurā, however, the early Buddhas seem to inherit their style and bearing from the sturdy *yakṣas* of the Mauryan age.

While there are a few early images of Hindu gods, such as the second century B. C. E. reliefs of Indra and Sūrya at Bhājā on the western *ghāts* south of Bombay, they were not established as cult icons. Rather, the Bhājā reliefs were part of a Buddhist monastic retreat. The real flowering of the Hindu divine image took place in the Gupta period (4th-7th centuries), called the Golden Age of Indian Art. During this time some of the earliest Hindu stone temples were constructed: the Durgā temple at Aihole near Bādāmi and the Viṣṇu temple at Deogarh, with its famous image of Viṣṇu reclining on the serpent Śeṣa.<sup>54</sup>

The development of images used in worship occurred at the same time as the development of the temples which houses the images. After the Gupta period, the impetus for such artistic and religious creativity came primarily from the regional dynasties of India. In Orissa in the east, there was an era of temple construction in Bhuvaneśvar (8th-11th centuries); nearby at Koṅārak the famous temple of the Sun was built (13th century). The temples of Khajurāho were patronized by the Candella kings of central India (11th century). In the west, the rock-cut temple at Ellūrā was created during the Rāṣṭrakūta dynasty (8th-9th centuries). In the south, the seaside temples of Mahābalipuram were built under the patronage of the Pallavās (7th-9th centuries); Tanjore was built by the Coḷas (11th century); Vijayanagar was built by refugees from the north during the Muslim invasions (16th century); and Madurai



was built by the Nayak dynasty (17th century). All these sanctuaries provided the stimulus for a wide variety of sculptural works, not only the prolific imagery of the temple exteriors, but the icons which occupied the inner *sancta* and the side shrines as well.<sup>55</sup>

The traditions of sculptural representation of the gods, as they emerged during these centuries, served both theological and narrative functions. First, Hindu images were visual "theologies," and they continue to be "read" as such by Hindus today. For example, the icon of the four-armed Śiva dancing in a ring of fire reveals the many aspects of this god in one visual symbol.<sup>56</sup> The flaming circle in which he dances is the circle of creation and destruction called *samsāra* (the earthly round of birth and death) or *māyā* (the illusory world). The Lord who dances in the circle of this changing world holds in two of his hands the drum of creation and the fire of destruction. He displays his strength by crushing the bewildered demon underfoot. Simultaneously, he shows his mercy by raising his palm to the worshiper in the "fear-not" gesture and, with another hand, by pointing to his upraised foot, where the worshiper may take refuge. It is a wild dance, for the coils of his ascetic's hair are flying in both directions, and yet the facial countenance of the Lord is utterly peaceful and his limbs in complete balance. Around one arm twines the *nāga*, the ancient serpent which he has incorporated into his sphere of power and wears now as an ornament. In his hair sits the mermaid River Gaṅgā, who landed first on Śiva's hair when she fell from heaven to earth. Such an image as the dancing Śiva engages the eye and extends one's vision of the nature of this god, using simple, subtle, and commonly understood gestures and emblems. In any image, it is the combination and juxtaposition of these gestures and emblems which expresses the ambiguities, the tensions, and the paradoxes which Hindus have seen in the deity: Śiva holds both the drum and the flame; the Goddess Kālī simultaneously wears a gory garland of skulls and gestures her protection; Viṣṇu appears with Śiva's emblems in his own hands. This image-world of India is what Betty Heimann has aptly called "visible thought."<sup>57</sup>

Images are not only visual theologies, they are also visual scriptures. The many myths of the tradition are narrated in living stone. In the West, the great carved portals of the Chartres Cathedral, for example, presented the stories, the ethics, and the eschatology of



Śiva Natarāja. Courtesy of the Dora Porter Mason Collection, Denver Art Museum, Denver, Colorado



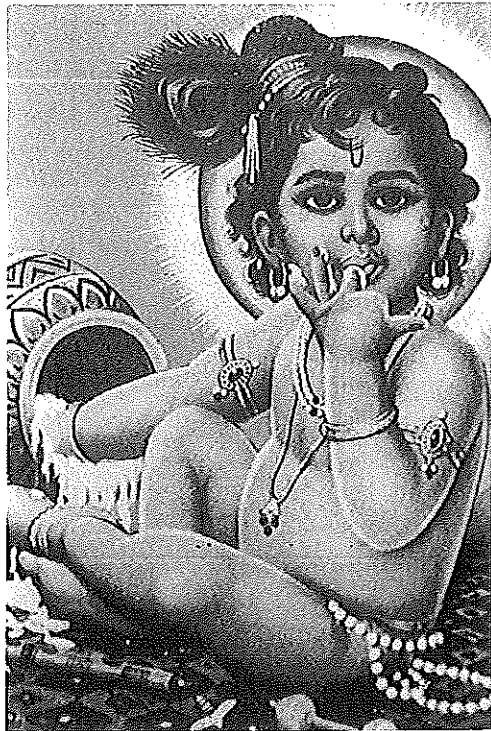
"The Descent of the Gaṅgā" from Ravalphadi cave, Aihole (Bijapur, Mysore). Late 6th century sandstone. Photography courtesy of the American Institute of Indian Studies, Rāmnagar, Banāras

the Christian tradition for the vast majority who could not read. Even earlier, Pope Gregory I had recognized the didactic value of images: "For that which a written document is to those who can read, that a picture is to the unlettered who look at it. Even the unlearned see in that what course they ought to follow; even those who do not know the alphabet can read there."<sup>58</sup> In India, some of the earliest sculptural reliefs, on the railing around the Buddhist *stūpa* at Bhārhut, were medallions which told the popular Buddhist Jātaka tales. Similarly, the great temples of Hindu India often displayed bas relief portrayals of myths and legends. In the late Gupta image depicted here, the story of the descent of the River Gaṅgā is told: Śiva stands, flanked by his wife Pārvatī and the ascetic Bhagīratha, who performed austerities for thousands of years in order to bring the Gaṅgā to earth. Bhagīratha, all skin and bones, is shown in an ascetic posture, holding his arms up in the air, while the Triple-Pathed Gaṅgā — flowing in heaven, on the earth, and in the netherworlds — hovers over Śiva's head in the form of three mermaids.

In India today, this narrative and didactic tradition is carried on in folk art. One will see the episodes of myth painted on the walls of public buildings, private homes, and temples. Hanumān carries the mountain full of healing herbs to revive the armies of Rāma in Laṅka, or Viṣṇu emerges from a turtle in one of his many world-rescuing *avatāras*. Local and regional legends are elaborated as well, such as those of the Goddess Mīnākṣī and Śiva Sundarēśvara painted in the temple compound at Madurai.

Modern technology has been eagerly employed for the presentation of traditional myths. In Indian commercial films, for example, one will see Śiva, standing in his animal hides in the high Himālayas, with animated artificial snakes swaying to and fro about his neck,<sup>59</sup> or one may see a cartoon rendering of the primordial contest of the gods and the demons when they churned the Sea of Milk.<sup>60</sup> In several of India's newest temple complexes, such as the Tulsī Mānas temple in Vārānaśī, there are Disneyland-type plastic figures of the gods, with moving parts and voices. For example, at the door of Tulsī Mānas temple stands Hanumān, the monkey servant of Lord Rāma, tearing open his chest every few seconds to reveal the Lord within his heart and uttering the words "Rām Rām!" Such images attract villagers from many miles away. These people

watch the animated scenes with fascination and devotion, and they linger to tell one another the stories and to remind one another of the details. Finally, the mass printing of color reproductions has extended the availability of images. Hindus are great consumers of these polychrome glossy images of the gods and their deeds. Taking them home from a temple or a place of pilgrimage, the devout may place such images in the home shrine. Thus one may have *darśan* not only of the image, but, of the picture of the image as well!



Popular polychrome image of the child Kṛṣṇa

## B. The Ritual Uses of the Image

How is the divine image regarded by Hindus? And how is it used in a ritual context? Pursuing these questions is important to our understanding of the nature of the divine image which Hindus "see."

Two principal attitudes may be discerned in the treatment of images. The first is that the image is primarily a focus for concentration, and the second is that the image is the embodiment of the divine.

In the first view, the image is a kind of *yantra*, literally a "device" for harnessing the eye and the mind so that the one-pointedness of thought (*ekāgrata*) which is fundamental to meditation can be attained. The image is a support for meditation. As the *Viṣṇu Sāṃhitā*, a ritual *āgama* text, puts it:

Without a form, how can God be mediated upon? If (He is) without any form, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality.<sup>61</sup>

The *Jābāla Upaniṣad* goes even a step further, intimating that such an image, while it may be a support for the beginner, is of absolutely no use to the yogi. "Yogins see Śiva in the soul and not in images. Images are meant for the imagination of the ignorant."<sup>62</sup>

It is the second attitude toward images that most concerns us in the context of this essay. That is, that the image is the real embodiment of the deity. It is not just a device for the focusing of human vision, but is charged with the presence of the god. This stance toward images emerged primarily from the devotional *bhakti* movement, which cherished the personal Lord "with qualities" (*saguṇa*) and which saw the image as one of the many ways in which the Lord becomes accessible to men and women, evoking their affections.

In the early theistic traditions of the *Bhāgavatas* or *Pāñcarātras*, who emphasized devotional worship (*pūjā*) rather than the Vedic sacrifice (*yajña*), the image was considered to be one of the five forms of the Lord. The five are the Supreme form (*para*), the emanations or powers of the Supreme (*vyūha*), the immanence of the Supreme in the heart of the individual and in the heart of the universe (*antaryāmin*), the incarnations of the Supreme (*vibhava*), and, finally, the presence of the Supreme Lord in a properly consecrated image (*arcā*).<sup>63</sup> Later, the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas used the term *arcāvataāra* to refer to the "image-incarnation" of the Lord: the form Viṣṇu graciously takes so that he may be worshiped by his devotees.<sup>64</sup>