I Love You, I Hate You: Toward a Psychology of the Hindu Deus Absconditus

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Psychological studies of Hindu religion and culture routinely stress a difference between “East” and “West.” Whether this difference reflects a certain Hindu pathology (Carstairs 1961; Spratt 1966; Masson 1980; Kakar 1981) or normative developments relative to each culture (Roland 1988; Kurtz 1992), the seemingly uncontested consensus is that Hindu India nurtures a “collective self.” Though generally finding many of these studies quite fascinating and often persuasive, I wish to draw attention to a dimension that is routinely overlooked. In an effort to paint with broad strokes a culture preoccupied with psychological mergers and integrations, many authors fail to take note of particular forms of bhakti, or devotion, that appear to contest such a preoccupation. The structural features of viraha bhakti (love-in-separation) and virodha bhakti (love-manifest-as-enmity) in particular reflect and influence a psychological construction of self that is not merged in or integrated with the other: viraha bhakti and virodha bhakti present Hindu god images that model a separated-individuated self.

Because any one religious tradition is clearly overdetermined, definitive psychological interpretations remain elusive. This is certainly the case with viraha bhakti and virodha bhakti. While maintaining that the two devotional models similarly reflect a separated-individuated self, I nevertheless present competing interpretations. The competition issues from the difference between interpreting god imagery as either corresponding with or compensating for the realities of childhood (Kirkpatrick 2005). In the former case, the religious model repeats culturally normative developments; in the latter, the religious model deviates from culturally normative developments. Whether or not the compensation is psychologically deviant is an altogether different issue.

The two interpretations I present here share a common point of departure in what the psychoanalytic anthropologist Stanley N. Kurtz calls the “new psychology of Hinduism” (1992: 6). Kurtz’s new psychology is based upon what many contemporary ethnographers consider to be a “more” accurate portrait of Hindu childrearing practices. Where the “classical” account addresses the Hindu mother’s wholesale indulgence of her child, the new account stresses physical indulgence accompanied
by emotional absence. With regard to viraha bhakti and virodha bhakti, the compensatory interpretation argues for the facilitation of an individuated sense of self that compensates for the culturally normative immersion of the self in the Hindu group, an immersion the mother’s emotional absence ostensibly facilitates. The love or hatred of the absent Hindu deity betrays in this way a certain love of self. Alternatively, the correspondence interpretation suggests that viraha bhakti and virodha bhakti correspond with the inner world of the Hindu child as he or she negotiates the relationship with the physically present, yet emotionally absent mother. Despairing love for and then angered abandonment of the absent deity corresponds precisely with the documented tactics children employ when forced to deal with the absent caregiver (Bowlby 1973).

The discussion unfolds over three sections. I first present a brief review of two psychological theories I find most pertinent to the present project, attachment theory and object relations theory. I choose these two among the many because they have been the privileged theories for previous psychological studies of Hindu mergers and integrations (Maduro 1976; Kakar 1981). As separation and individuation are antithetical to merger and integration, a certain consistency in theoretical approach commends itself. I proceed from there to an admittedly brief discussion of Hindu god imagery. My intention is not, to be sure, to engage in a detailed analysis of any one particular image. I am not interested in the minutiae of particular images; studies of such minutiae abound. My intention is rather to identify the structural condition of particular Hindu god images that most reflect the ideal-type relationships between self and other that the theories address. Universal patterns of relationship inform the Hindu constructions of deity, constructions that reflect upon the relationship between devotee and deity and, by direct extension, self and other. The final section applies object relations theory and attachment theory to the Hindu god imagery. In so doing, the discussion necessitates a consideration of the contested topic of Hindu childrearing practices. The present project thus follows Kurtz’s methodology: “By juxtaposing child-rearing practices with myth and ritual, a picture of the inner meaning of development can be built up” (1992: 178). Indeed, the application of object relations theory and attachment theory to Hindu myths and childrearing ethnographies yields tentative answers to the question I pursue here: What is the psychology of the Hindu deus absconditus?

Theory: Attachment and Object Relations

Attachment theory addresses primarily human infant ethology. Based on the work of the British psychiatrist John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), attachment theory documents the proximity seeking strategies of the human infant. Human infants—and adults—consistently and predictably seek out proximity to a stronger, wiser other—the attachment figure—in moments of threat, distress, or fear of abandonment. Humans are, biologically speaking, irreducibly gregarious. Gregariousness has its risks. The attachment figure, for whatever reasons, may not be available. Relation-