and their forms. These relationships, which define the structure of the whole—the pantheon of deities in the widest sense—are built on difference, but difference emergent from a polytheistic logic of fluid continuity. In this logic, one deity can always become many and many become one, like Shiva at a Gujarati temple who is also the 330 million forms of himself and every other god and goddess.

Chapter 3 CHRIS FULLER

THE CAMPHOR FLAME

WORSHIP

PUJA, "worship," is the core ritual of popular theistic Hinduism. Every day, in temples and homes throughout India, *puja* is being performed before the deities' images by both priests and laypeople. *Puja* in a large temple, especially in the blackness enveloping the innermost shrines, has a powerful sensual impact, often amplified by the press of a large crowd of devotees in a hot, confined space. Frequently, there is a deafening and even discordant sound as the music of pipes and drums combines with ringing bells and the chanting of sacred texts. Scented smoke pours from the burning incense and camphor, and the heavy perfume of sandalwood, jasmine, and roses hangs in the air. The bright silks and gold, silver and jewels covering the images scintillate as priests wave oil lamps through the darkness. And when the ritual reaches a climax, devotees lift their hands in the *namaskara* gesture to show their respect to the deities whose names they loudly praise.

In a small temple or house, where *puja* is performed with fewer people present, the ritual is usually more restrained, so that its personal and almost homely aspect is more apparent than in a large temple. In *puja*, the deity in its form as an image is typically welcomed with a drink of water; it is undressed and bathed, and then clothed again, decked in jewelry and garlanded with flowers. A mirror may be provided so that the deity can gaze upon its own beauty. The deity is offered a meal, ideally of sumptuous splendor, and entertained by music, singing, and dancing; incense is wafted over it and decorated lamps are waved before it. At the end, the deity is bade farewell with the standard gesture of respect. In a temple in the early morning, a deity may be gently woken and at night put to bed, perhaps alone with a lullaby, perhaps with its consort to the accompaniment of erotic hymns. *Puja*, at its heart, is the worshipers' reception and entertainment of a distinguished and adored guest. It is a ritual to honor powerful gods and goddesses, and often to express personal affection for them as well; it can also create a unity between deity and worshiper that dissolves the difference between them.

The Nature of Divine Images

Like other rituals addressed to the deities of popular Hinduism, *puja* is normally conducted with images (*murti*; *vigraha*), and I must begin with

them. All larger temples, as well as many domestic shrines and other places of worship, contain sculptured images. Most readers, even if they have never visited a Hindu temple, will have seen images in museums or photographs of them in books. Sculptured images are anthropomorphic (or sometimes theriomorphic) representations of deities, carved in stone, cast in bronze, or made out of wood, terra-cotta, or other materials. Sometimes images are made out of painted clay, so that they disintegrate when thrown into the river or sea at the end of a festival. In almost all large temples, the majority of images are stone or bronze, and they are often exquisitely beautiful. In a temple, the immovable image (*mula murti*, "root image") of the presiding deity, generally made of stone, is housed in the main shrine; around it stand images of subsidiary deities, sometimes placed inside shrines and sometimes not. Movable images (*utsava murti*, "festival image") of the presiding (and subsidiary) deities, which are usually cast in bronze, are used in festival processions and other rituals performed away from the immovable images. Although most sculptured images are anthropomorphic or theriomorphic, the aniconic *linga* of Shiva (as mentioned in chap. 2) is an important exception.

Plainly, since many images represent gods and goddesses with several heads, eyes, or arms and a host of other fantastic features, they are not designed to be exact likenesses of ordinary people or animals. The deities have powers and attributes transcending those of earthly beings, which their images are intended to display. However, the design of sculptured images (including *linga*s) is strictly governed by traditional iconographic rules, which in principle define precisely their proportion and shape, as well as the features particular to the deity whose image it is. Thus the number of arms, or the weapons and animals held in their hands, are specified uniquely for each deity or form of a deity, who can easily be identified once the rules of Hindu iconography are known.

Images are normally man-made artifacts. They are not usually considered to be sacred objects until they have been consecrated by installing divine power within them. However, some aniconic images are actually uncarved rocks. The *linga*s in many of Shiva's grandest temples are believed to have emerged naturally from the ground, "self-existent" and already full of divine power. A comparable example is the special type of fossil known as *shalagrama*, considered sacred to Vishnu. As it is imbued with Vishnu's powers, it can be revered just like any other image of the god. The same applies to the dried berry of a shrub (*Elaeocarpus ganitrus*), known as *rudraksha*, which is sacred to Shiva. Various other "naturally" sacred mineral and vegetable objects are treated similarly.

In the category of aniconic images, we can also place the unhewn or perhaps roughly etched stones, sometimes painted red, that serve as little village deities' images throughout India; they are either housed in crude

shrines or left standing under a tree or in the open air. These stones serve exactly the same function as the sculptured images and *linga*s found in larger temples, even though they do not fit the classical iconographic rules. The same applies to other representations, such as the metal tridents or pots that stand at small shrines in some areas of India. Pots in particular, when filled with water in which a deity's power has been installed, are often used as the functional equivalents of sculptured mobile images at little deities' temples.

Frequently, a picture of a deity substitutes for an image. Pictures have probably always been used, but the advent of cheap color printing has made an enormous selection available in contemporary India. Carved images are relatively expensive and in millions of poorer homes, the household shrine contains only pictures of the family's favorite deities, which are consecrated and worshiped just like images.

Completeness requires us to stretch the category of images still further to embrace, for instance, natural phenomena such as rivers, as well as animate beings. For example, although any deity may be installed in a water-pot, the consecration ritual is generally said to turn the water into the water of the river Ganges (Ganga), the phenomenal form of the goddess Ganga. The Ganges (and indeed all rivers) are both "images" of Ganga and Ganga herself. In some contexts, much the same holds true for the soil in relation to the goddess of the earth, Bhudevi. A comparable but distinct example is the burning oil lamp, commonly identified with the goddess Lakshmi. Among living beings, various animals can be understood in a similar way. The cow is probably the best known example; it is frequently, although not invariably or exclusively, identified as an "image" of Lakshmi and Lakshmi herself. And most important, in the last analysis the same can apply to a human being. For example, when a priest becomes a form of Vishnu or Shiva during temple worship, his body is really an animate image, a literally anthropomorphic form of the god and, as such, the priest worships himself just as he worships the deity in its image. The case of the human "image" is important for understanding the relationship between a deity and its image, but let us first go back to ordinary sculptured images.

The Relationship between Deity and Image

When Hindus visit a temple, just gazing on the images for a "sight" or "vision" (*darshana*) of the deities is one of the most important things that they do. *Darshana* brings good fortune, well-being, grace, and spiritual merit to the seeing devotees, especially if they go to the temple early in the morning just after the deities have woken up. But *darshana* is not merely

a passive sight of the deity in its image form; the deity is also gazing on the devotee with eyes that never blink, unlike those of human beings. Hence in *darshana* there is the "exchange of vision" (Eck 1981a: 6) that is so central to Hindu worship before images. In Hindu iconography, the eyes have a special place, and painting on or "opening" an image's eyes is frequently said to vivify it in an essential preliminary to consecration and worship. Shiva in particular is often represented with a third eye in the center of his forehead, from which his fiery power flows out, but on all divine images (as well as on men and women) the mark above the bridge of the nose symbolizes the third eye, the point from which power emanates. Thus when devotees look at images, they are also standing in the field of the deities' power and absorbing it like light through their own eyes.

So in the act of *darshana*, what exactly is a Hindu looking at? Is it the deity, its iconic representation in an image, or something in between? The answer is not easy, but it is crucial for understanding popular Hinduism.

We can begin by saying that a deity is *in* an image. It may be there because it has been installed by a consecration ritual, as with a manufactured image, or it may be "naturally" there, as with a self-existent image or *linga*. The deity may be permanently present in the image, as is generally said to be true in temples, or it may be there only temporarily, as with images made for a festival and discarded afterwards. A distinction between a deity and its image is plainly presupposed in many contexts. For example, the consecration ritual itself is premised on the notion that the image is "empty" before the deity is installed. By some more theologically sophisticated Hindus, such as the priests of the Minakshi temple in Madurai with whom I worked, the relationship between a deity and its image is commonly explained in terms of the power, *shakti*, possessed by all deities, even though *shakti* itself is personified as feminine. According to this explanation, the image actually contains some or all of the deity's power, so that the purpose of consecration is to install that power in a particular location, the image. There is no limit to the number of separate images within which the deity's power can be installed and the deity is never shackled by locating its power in images. Hence an image itself cannot be equated with its corresponding deity; the object of worship is not the image, but the deity whose power is inside it. Devotees who gaze upon an image do not directly see the deity, although they are touched by the power flowing out of the image. Certainly, much Hindu ritual is most consistently and economically explained by treating the image as a repository of divine power and, therefore, by distinguishing clearly between the image and its corresponding deity.

Yet this distinction between container and contained must not be overplayed. It is true that the identification of an image can be disputed, so that different people disagree about which deity's powers are in an image;

sometimes, too, the accepted identification of an image changes over time. Nonetheless, if an object—sculptured or otherwise—is a divine image, it must in principle be the image of a particular deity (or occasionally deities). Hence an image, unlike an ordinary container, is defined precisely by what it contains—the power of a particular deity—so that in the final analysis there can be no absolute distinction between an image and its corresponding deity. Thus people commonly point to an image and observe that it is, say, Vishnu or Shiva, of whom they have had *darshana*; this is not a metaphorical but a matter-of-fact statement that identifies the image as a specific, named deity. Similarly, the term *murti* is widely employed to denote a deity's form (especially Shiva as Dakshinamurti, Nataraja, etc.) as well as a deity's image. Consequently, we must understand the relationship between a deity and its image in a double sense, for the deity can either be distinguished from the image or identified with it, so that the image itself is then a "bodily" form of the deity, made concrete and visible in mundane time and space. Thus worship is addressed to a deity whose power is *in* an image and also to a deity *as* an image.

The double relationship between deity and image is particularly striking in the case of the human "image." Take for example the priest who, in south Indian Shiva temples, should install Shiva's powers in himself before he worships the god; according to the Shaiva ritual texts known as the Agamas, "only Shiva can worship Shiva." Plainly, the formula implies that the only perfect worship is the one performed by the god for himself, but here on earth it is commonly taken to mean that the priest must become, at one level, Shiva himself. As a form of the god, the priest then worships himself as part of Shiva's worship in the temple. At another level, though, the priest is a man who can be distinguished from the god Shiva, like a container from the contained. Hence in these temple rituals, Shiva assumes a form as the priest, but he is also the god whose power is in the priest, his animate image. In general terms, the same applies to anyone identified as divine, whether it is someone possessed by a village goddess, or a bride and groom treated as deities on their wedding day, or a holy man widely revered as a living god. In all these cases, to identify a person as a form of a deity also implies that that person is an "image" of the deity, for every image is also a divine form.

Finally, let me note that because no deity is constrained by its embodiment in images, a deity can be—and sometimes is—adored in imageless form; specifically, the divine "without qualities" (*nirguna*) is worshiped instead of the divine "with qualities" (*saguna*) made visible iconically. Some religious virtuosi, as well as Hindus opposed to so-called idolatry, have persistently argued that material images are needed only by the simple-minded and spiritually immature, who cannot turn their minds to the

godhead without visible representations on which to focus. Muslims in India have long decried the Hindus' reverence for images, but in the last two hundred years or so, partly in reaction to Christian censure during the colonial period, image worship has been increasingly criticized by reformist Hindu intellectuals as a superstitious deviation from the true, original religion of the Vedas, which only marginally refer to the ritual use of images. But apart from some adherents of movements like the Arya Samaj in northern India, which has vigorously opposed image worship since its foundation in 1875, the vast majority of ordinary Hindus have been untroubled by criticism of their "idolatry." They know, as any sympathetic observer must also recognize, that in popular Hinduism devotion and respect for the deities are not diminished, but most completely expressed, through the use of images in worship.

The Contexts of *Puja*

Hindus perform *puja* in a wide range of settings. In temples, where priests are usually responsible for performing it before the deities' images, *puja* should be carried out regularly. Typically, in the great deities' major temples, it is done at least once a day, but in very grand and well-endowed ones, the daily cycle of worship includes a number of separate acts of worship, held at different times of day. In small and poorly funded temples, by contrast, worship may be done no more than once a week or even less often, and at the simple shrines of little deities, it tends to be sporadic. Worship at public temples is classically said to be "for the benefit of the world," because it is addressed on behalf of all to the deities who protect the whole population and preserve the entire sociocosmic order. At private temples belonging to particular families, kin groups, castes, or other social units, worship is mainly intended to benefit those who own the temple. When worship is performed by priests, especially in public temples, ordinary devotees have no active role and the value of the ritual is unaffected by the presence or absence of an audience. In all public temples, however, worship can also be performed for the deities either by individual devotees themselves or by priests acting on their behalf, although most ordinary people are usually content simply to salute the deities with the gesture of respect and to have *darshana* of them.

In addition to the worship conducted regularly, a temple's ritual cycle normally includes a range of periodic festivals (*utsava*) as well. (Confusingly, the term *puja* can also refer to such festivals, such as the annual Bengali goddesses' festivals of Durga Puja and Kali Puja. In this chapter, however, only *puja* as a single act of worship is under discussion.) In very large temples, many different festivals occur weekly, fortnightly,

monthly, and annually, whereas in smaller temples there may be at most only one annual festival. During festivals, various kinds of rituals take place, such as processions, dramatic performances, dancing by the divinely possessed, and, at some temples, animal sacrifice. Festivals always incorporate acts of *puja* as well, and in its basic structure worship during festivals does not differ from worship performed on other occasions. At public temple festivals, the rituals—including the *puja*—are again for the benefit of all, whereas the beneficiaries of private temple festivals are particular groups.

Besides temples, *puja* is performed in many other institutions, such as monasteries, as well as in Hindu homes, normally at the household shrine where images or pictures of the deities are kept. Ideally, worship at home is done regularly, daily or perhaps weekly; although men do participate, especially during the more important festivals, domestic worship is often mainly the responsibility of women. Interestingly—and probably typically—a Marathi Brahman woman saw this as crucial in succinctly explaining why ritual power primarily belongs to females: "Everyone has some *shakti*, but women have more of it because they do more rituals and fasts" (Slocum 1988: 208). Some richer, high-caste households employ Brahman domestic priests to conduct their *pujas*, at least at major festivals, but the vast majority of domestic worship is done by ordinary householders. The principal purpose of domestic *puja*, of course, is to protect the household, but in addition many people perform personal worship at home, often addressing it to their own favorite deity (*ishtadeva*; *ishtadevata*).

In each and every context, *puja* is often one component of a longer sequence, so that it is performed in conjunction with hymn singing, offering oblations into a fire, festival processions, animal sacrifice, or a host of other rituals. Naturally, *puja* can also vary enormously in its elaborateness and correspondingly in the quantities of time and money spent on it. Between the spectacular worship conducted during a major festival at a great temple and the minimal rite held in a simple shrine or a poor home, there is a wide and obvious divergence. But despite this, and despite significant variations in the style of worship among different groups of Hindus in different regions of India, all rituals of *puja* have the same fundamental structure, which I shall now begin to investigate.

Worship in the Minakshi Temple

Let us begin with one particular example of *puja*, which comes from the Minakshi temple in Madurai. Rituals of worship in the Minakshi temple vary considerably. The one to be described is neither as elaborate as

some, nor as simple and almost perfunctory as many others. I should make it clear that I shall not describe one specific event. Instead, I shall present a composite account of a ritual that occurs repeatedly in almost exactly the same way on similar occasions, mainly during major festivals for Minakshi and Sundareshwara (Shiva), the presiding deities of the temple.

At such a ritual, movable, festival images are the objects of worship. Minakshi's movable image, which is about two feet high, represents her standing alone, like her larger immovable image. Sundareshwara's movable image, of similar size, is not a *linga*, but an anthropomorphic image of Somaskanda, which represents the god sitting beside a female consort (Uma), with a small figure of their son Skanda between them.

Before a festival procession, the two images are normally placed side-by-side in a hall inside the temple complex. They are clothed—Minakshi in a sari and Somaskanda in a white cloth—but these garments are rarely neat, and the few garlands draped on the images have obviously been there for some hours. Priests and other temple officiants, including musicians, wait near the images and a small crowd of devotees sits or stands in front of the hall. At the start of the *puja*, a curtain is drawn in front of the images to shield them from the gaze of onlookers, but it is usually easy to see round the curtain and no one really objects.

Parenthetically, I should note that a *puja* of the kind to be described is rarely preceded by a preparatory ritual of purification. The latter is generally omitted in the Minakshi temple, although it is recognized that it always ought to be performed, as it is before certain very important rituals. The preparatory ritual is made up of a sequence of several separate rites. The priest states his earnest intention (*sankalpa*) to perform the main ritual that will follow and he worships Ganesha, lord of beginnings and obstacles, to ensure success. In the course of the rites that complete the sequence, the priest, the site, and the instruments of worship (the lamps, vessels, and so on, in addition to any special object to be used in the main ritual) are successively more highly purified. Charged with the power of the deities that has been installed in them, the priest and the instruments of worship are then worshiped as well.

Puja begins when the musicians start to play and a chanter, a Brahman officiant who is not a priest, starts to recite *mantras* (ritual formulas) in Sanskrit. The *mantras* derive from the Agamas and almost all rituals performed in the Minakshi temple include their recitation. The priest presiding over the ritual, assisted by others, first removes the clothes and garlands from the images of Minakshi and Somaskanda in preparation for the bathing ritual, known as *abhisheka*. He pours or rubs over the images a series of mostly liquid substances, such as (in this order) sesame-seed oil, milk, curds, a sweet confection known as *panchamrita*, green-coconut

water, and finally consecrated water into which divine power has been invoked beforehand by the chanting of *mantras*. When this water is poured, the musical accompaniment reaches a climax, signaled by loud and rapid drumming.

The next stage is the decoration ritual, *alankara*, when the images are dressed in new clothes, given new sacred threads, sprinkled with perfume, and adorned with jewelry and fresh garlands of flowers. (Although Minakshi is a goddess, she—like her husband—wears over her shoulder the sacred thread that is the prerogative of adult male Brahmans.) A dot of red powder (*kunkuma*), symbolizing the goddess, is placed above the bridge of the nose on the images, and three stripes of white ash (*vibhuti*) are drawn horizontally on their foreheads, so that the images themselves bear the Shaivas' distinctive mark. The decoration during a major festival is often highly elaborate: an expensive, colored silk sari for Minakshi and a white silk cloth for Somaskanda, immensely valuable ornaments of gold and precious stones for both images, and several heavy garlands of flowers.

After decoration comes the food-offering ritual, *naivedya*. A covered plate of food, normally plain boiled rice (although there are alternatives), is held before each image in turn by a Brahman assistant to the priests. The presiding priest continuously rings a bell while sprinkling water around the plate, whose lid is slightly raised by the assistant. In this way, the priest offers the food to the god and goddess. The food (to be consumed later by priests or other temple officiants) is then taken away, and the curtain that has screened the whole of the worship thus far is drawn back. Its purpose is partly to protect the deities, especially Minakshi, from prying eyes while they are bathed and dressed, and partly to hide them from evil spirits, who are particularly jealous of the deities' splendid fare and always try to snatch it during the food offering.

Removing the screen lets all the devotees see the final stage, the display of lamps, *diparadhana*. In this ritual, the priest waves a series of oil lamps, and finally a candelabra burning camphor, in front of the images. On various occasions, different lamps are used, but a typical series comprises five oil lamps, each with its own design and number of wicks. The closing candelabra has seven camphor flames (one on each of its six branches and one in the center); although not strictly part of the *diparadhana*, we can include the candelabra here. Although there are variations in style among priests, it is generally agreed in the temple that the lamps should be waved separately before the head, body, and feet of an image, each time describing in the air the almost circular shape (as written in Tamil) of the ancient mystic syllable *om*, which represents the totality of the universe. The priest, facing the images, waves the oil lamps with his right hand and continuously rings a bell with his left; he does lay down the bell to take

the camphor candelabra in both hands. Usually, the candelabra is waved with special care, high in the air, so that everyone can see it; at the same time, the musicians drum very loudly and rapidly to signal the culminating climax of the worship. At this point, many watching devotees raise their hands to gesture in salutation and call out the praises of the god and goddess. Many of them crowd round the priest, who will bring them the still burning candelabra, so that they can cup their hands over the flames before touching their eyes with the fingertips. From the priest devotees also accept red powder or, more usually, white ash to put on their own foreheads. They then start to walk away, and the priests and their assistants begin to move the images in readiness for the next event in the festival.

Ideally, just as every *puja* should be preceded by a preparatory ritual of purification, so it should also be completed with a sacrificial fire ritual. Briefly, this involves kindling a fire, invoking the deity—in this case Shiva—in the fire, and worshiping him there, pouring oblations of clarified butter and other foodstuffs into the flames (the rite known as *homa*), and then making offerings to the temple's guardian deities around the fire, including an extra offering to the guardian deity of the northeast quadrant, who is himself a form of Shiva. Like the preparatory ritual, the fire sacrifice is carried out in conjunction with acts of worship during certain very important rituals, but otherwise it is omitted. In a *puja* of the kind described, the distribution of powder and ash to devotees normally completes the ritual.

The Structure and Meaning of *Puja*

In theory, we might uncover the general structure of *puja* and elucidate its meaning by comparing a series of ethnographic accounts, for which my description of the Minakshi temple *puja* would be one starting point. However, there is a better and simpler approach. The Agamas, which in principle govern the ritual in Shiva's south Indian temples, belong to a body of Sanskrit texts that are treated as authoritative because they contain the deities' own directions for their proper worship. But these texts, since they are the products of an indigenous intellectual desire to abstract and systematize, also provide us with paradigmatic descriptions of *puja*. Only for the worship of the great deities—notably Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi in major temples served by Brahman priests—are texts like the Agamas taken as authoritative. Elsewhere, especially for little village deities worshiped by non-Brahman priests, even putative reference to ritual texts is rare. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that all *puja* rituals share the same fundamental structure and that structure is most clearly laid out in the paradigmatic descriptions contained in the Sanskrit texts.

According to the texts, *puja* consists of an ordered sequence of offerings and services, each of which is known as an *upachara*. Different texts contain variant lists of offerings and services, but their overall sequence is always much the same and the most common total number is sixteen. Jan Gonda (1970: 186, n. 196) provides a typical list of the sixteen *upacharas* in order, which I reproduce with some added clarifications in table 1.

The sixteen items in this sequence can be grouped into partly distinct phases. First, the deity is invoked (or invited to enter the image) and then installed there (nos. 1–2). Second, water for washing is offered (nos. 3–5). Third—the heart of the ritual—the image is bathed, dressed, adorned, shown incense and a lamp, and offered food (nos. 6–13). Fourth, after a series of gestures of respect, the deity is bidden farewell (nos. 14–16).

The Minakshi temple *puja* described above comprises four rituals that are separately identified: bathing, decoration, food offering, and waving of lamps. These four rituals are normally considered to constitute the full *puja* for Minakshi and Sundareshwara both during festivals and in daily worship, when *puja* is performed before their immovable images. Each ritual is classified as an *upachara* and they correspond—comparing them with the list in table 1—to bathing (no. 6); dressing, putting on the sacred thread, sprinkling with perfume, and adorning with flowers (nos. 7–10); offering food (no. 13); and waving an oil lamp (no. 12). Quite often the lamp service is immediately preceded by waving a censer of incense as well (no. 11). In the Minakshi temple, the rest of the offerings and services (nos. 1–5, 14–16) are usually omitted, to leave only the central, third phase (nos. 6–13).

Table 1
The Sixteen Offerings and Services of *Puja*

1. Invocation of the deity
2. Offering a seat to or installation of the deity
3. Offering water for washing the feet
4. Offering water for washing the head and body
5. Offering water for rinsing the mouth
6. Bathing
7. Dressing or offering a garment
8. Putting on the sacred thread
9. Sprinkling with perfume
10. Adorning with flowers
11. Burning incense
12. Waving an oil lamp
13. Offering food
14. Paying homage by prostration, etc.
15. Circumambulation
16. Dismissal or taking leave of the deity

Does this mean that the Minakshi temple *puja* is incomplete and therefore imperfect? The answer is certainly not. In Hinduism, ritual abbreviation and simplification are ubiquitous procedures that are allowed by the texts themselves, and the practice in the Minakshi temple is entirely conventional. Admittedly, temple officiants—if directly questioned—sometimes concede that the missing offerings and services should be included, although they often plead as well that because the images are permanently installed in the temple, they always contain the power of the deities, whose invocation and dismissal are therefore redundant. Arguments of this sort, though, are largely beside the point. A full series of sixteen offerings and services is best, but a shorter sequence, albeit less good, still constitutes a properly performed ritual of worship. Moreover, although the "full" worship in the Minakshi temple comprises only four rituals, which leaves out at least eight of the sixteen textual *upacharas*, it is common practice merely to offer food and wave the lamps. This is done for Minakshi and Sundareshwara on many occasions and for the subsidiary deities almost always. None of this is peculiar to the Minakshi temple and in most temples, which the former dwarfs in size and resources, a *puja* as full as its four rituals is fairly unusual. Frequently, in the Minakshi temple and elsewhere, *puja* is further reduced to no more than the showing of a one-flame camphor lamp with a plantain on the side as a food offering. Hindus commonly refer to the lamp service—and especially the camphor flame display—as *arati*, a term widely used throughout India as a synonym for *puja*. In the final analysis, the camphor flame, as the culmination of worship, stands synecdochically for the entire ritual. Synecdoche, indeed, is a basic principle of all Hindu ritual, including *puja*. As ordered parts of the whole, short and simple rituals, even if they are described as less good, still reproduce the structure and meaning of their fuller homologues.

It should now be clear that *puja* is, in the first place, an act of respectful honoring and that this meaning is inherent in its structure as an ordered series of offerings and services, most fully displayed in the paradigmatic textual model, but no less present in the Minakshi temple worship that I have described, as well as in more attenuated versions of the ritual. Honor is shown to the deities by presenting offerings and services to their image forms that are (or should be) as luxurious, sumptuous, and delightful as possible, and they should also fit the preferences that each deity is believed to have (for example, elaborate bathing rituals for Shiva and beautiful decorations for Vishnu). That worship is an act of homage to powerful, superior deities is explicitly understood by priests in the Minakshi temple and by many, if not most, Hindus throughout India.

It is common to liken the honor shown to deities with that due to kings, and Gonda's interpretation is echoed by other writers: *puja* "originally

and essentially is an invocation, reception and entertainment of God as a royal guest" (1970: 77). Certainly, the idea that the deities are royal guests is important, especially in major temples where they are actually proclaimed as sovereign rulers. On the other hand, it would be wrong to conclude that *puja* always represents deities as supereminent kings. As I remarked earlier, Hindu worship has a personal and homely aspect too, and Diana L. Eck rightly observes that it can reveal "not only an attitude of honor but also an attitude of affection" (1981a: 36). Gods and goddesses are often the honored guests of humble worshipers, and the offerings and services of *puja* closely resemble the acts that ordinary people perform for each other or their guests at home. Respectful honoring is the first meaning and purpose of worship, but it elaborates the hospitality of the home as much as the grandeur of the palace, even if the latter is more striking in great temples.

The Deities' Needs and Their Response to Worship

Plainly, it is men and women who worship; they have to honor the deities. But do the deities need to be honored, and do they need the offerings and services rendered to them? Eck points out that worship is shaped by human ideas about honoring guests, rather than being a response to "God's necessity" (ibid.: 37). She is right and it is crucial that *puja* compromises neither the deities' power nor their other attributes. Nonetheless, the question of divine needs is not simple and there are divergent answers to it, which also suggest that worship, despite its fundamentally uniform structure, can have varying significance for different groups of Hindus.

In the Minakshi temple ritual, as in the vast majority of *pujas*, the images have a key role because the various offerings and services are actually made to them. The images of Minakshi and Somaskanda are physically bathed and decorated, real food is placed before them, and lamps illuminate them. Inasmuch as the images are forms of Minakshi and Sundareshwara, the divine couple themselves accept the offerings and services, or at least they are presumed to do so.

Yet it does not follow that the deities really require these ministrations. In the Minakshi temple, I was repeatedly told that *puja*, like other rituals, is designed "to please the gods." If worship, especially in public temples, is performed properly and does please the deities, they can be expected to respond by protecting the whole community so that it flourishes; if worship is not performed properly so that the deities are displeased, they are likely to withdraw protection, causing distress and misery. Many Minakshi temple priests blame contemporary India's problems on what they

see as persistently poor performance of temple ritual. That in turn is put down to excessive interference in temple affairs by the Tamilnadu government, whose control over the temple they fiercely resent. However, even when temple worship is performed properly, divine protection cannot be guaranteed because the deities cannot be directly induced to act beneficently by honoring them in worship. Ultimately, the action of deities is determined by their own will, not that of mortals on earth.

But for my informants in Madurai, the impossibility of compelling divine action also depends on the premise that the deities' pleasure does not derive from the offerings and services in themselves. Gods and goddesses do not actually need offerings and services, because they never are dirty, ugly, hungry, or unable to see in the dark. Hence the purpose of worship is not to satisfy nonexistent divine needs, but to honor the deities and show devotion by serving them *as if* they had such needs. By this method alone can human beings adopt a truly respectful attitude toward the deities. Such an explanation of how *puja* pleases deities is logically consistent with a relatively emphatic distinction between a deity and its image, the container of divine power, because then the deity itself is not directly touched by the offerings and services made to its image. The outlook of Minakshi temple officiants is intellectually consistent and echoes the Agamic ritual texts, which make it clear that Shiva never requires anything from human beings. Many Hindus share a perspective close to the temple officiants' on the purpose of *puja*, the deities' needs, and the role of images, even if they articulate it less systematically.

Yet there is an alternative view, which is more consistent with the tendency to play down the distinction between container and contained, so as to equate an image with the deity of which it is a form. This view is more prevalent among Vaishnavas, notably devotees of Krishna, who tend to insist more forcefully than many Shaivas that the image is fully a form of the deity. Correspondingly, in the Vaishnava tradition, the god himself is often thought to need the offerings and services provided for him in worship. Devotees typically portray Krishna—especially in his form as a child—as willingly dependent upon them, so that the god, and the image that is his physical manifestation, actually suffer if they are not worshiped. In other words, Krishna has bodily needs that must be met by the offerings and services of *puja* and he is—in the form of the image receiving them—pleased because his worshipers meet those needs.

Even in this case, though, Krishna's needs are satisfied by human beings because he permits it, thereby expressing a mutual dependence between god and devotee that is more prominent in Vaishnava than Shaiva cults. It is all part of Krishna's "play" (*lila*) in this world; he has chosen to make himself dependent on his worshipers, most patently as a child,

but his choice implies no qualification of his divine power. As John S. Hawley says, Krishna "allows us the game of feeding him for our benefit; it is symbolic action and would have no value but for the belief, the mood with which it is infused. God dines on our love, not our food" (1981: 18). Consequently, whether worship is addressed to Vishnu, Shiva, or any other deity, its fundamental purpose is human ministration to *putative* divine needs, in which the action of offering and serving, rather than the offerings and services themselves, is critical. Furthermore, Vaishnavas are equally insistent that worship does not constrain the deities. Therefore, irrespective of whether a deity actually has needs, or an image actually receives the offerings and services, *puja* is still an act of respectful honoring whose objective is to please a deity in the hope or expectation—but not the certainty—that it will protect and favor human beings.

Not all Hindu worship, however, is so high-minded and it frequently is motivated by a conscious intention to persuade or induce a deity to bestow reciprocal favors on the worshiper. Many Hindus, like the priests in the Minakshi temple, insist that it is always wrong to worship in such a spirit, as well as counter-productive, because the deities will be displeased by worship done with blatant ulterior motives. In some regions, especially western India where Vaishnava devotionalism is influential, a linguistic distinction is made between *puja* and *seva*. *Puja* is an exchange, a transaction "made in connection with benefits for the worshiper," whereas "worship through *seva* . . . represents the 'loving care' of those devoted to the deity without thought of benefit or return by the latter" (Mayer 1981b: 167). Elsewhere, the term *puja* rarely carries this negative connotation, but the distinction identified by Adrian C. Mayer is a more general one, and *puja* (to revert to the one term) often is performed by or on behalf of individuals or groups, who want to win boons from the deities. For instance, ordinary Hindus in Madurai have often told me that they regularly worship deities in connection with specific requests. Some deny that they bargain and say that they ask a priest to do the worship while simultaneously praying to the deity, but other people frankly admit that they try to make a deal. Some people even ask first and only offer worship afterwards if their request is met, arguing that it is senseless to spend time and money worshiping deities who will not demonstrate that they can help.

There is no doubt that the great deities, especially Vishnu and Shiva, are generally held to be unresponsive and even angered by futile efforts to persuade them to act in specific ways. Many little deities, by contrast, notably deified malevolent spirits, are thought to voice particular demands, and to be open to more or less direct bargaining about what they will do if such and such an offering is made during worship. In such cases,

respectful homage is almost completely overshadowed by the real and assumed motives of worshiper and deity, respectively. Yet other deities—for example, many forms of the goddess—are not thought to take the lofty attitude of Vishnu and Shiva, but are still impervious to blatant cajolery. All these assumptions about the deities are themselves significant elements in the ideological discourse of evaluation, for superior deities are partly distinguished from inferior ones precisely by their ostensible refusal to enter into demeaning bargains with men and women about possible favors. Similarly, as part of the same discourse, educated, high-caste Hindus are generally more inclined to dismiss and condemn attempts to bargain with deities than uneducated, low-caste people, although the latter certainly do worship deities without ulterior motives as well; we must be careful not to endorse wholesale elitist disparagement of the faith of the lower strata. It is, however, clear that there is considerable variation among Hindus about the feasibility and morality of seeking personal benefits from worship. *Puja* is first of all an act of respectful honoring, and this is plainly inscribed in its structure. Yet how and why it is such an act, and whether honoring the deities excludes treating with them, are issues on which real differences of opinion exist among Hindus themselves.

The Achievement of Identity between Deity and Worshiper

Let us now turn to one of the most important and distinctively Hindu aspects of *puja*. This is the movement toward identity between deity and worshiper, which is partly revealed by the sequential logic of the ritual as it unfolds.

In the words of Penelope Logan, whose analysis of domestic worship in Madurai I draw on here, a fundamental process in *puja* is "embodying the deity and disembodying man" (1980: 123). In this process, the image plays a crucial role. Worship, whether in the home or elsewhere, is normally performed before an image precisely because the deity is then represented "with qualities" discernible by people and it takes on a tangible, fixed, and embodied form, proximate to the human being's condition. In its form as an image, the deity, so to speak, has come "down" toward the human level; through the performance of worship, the worshiper goes "up" toward the divine level to achieve, finally, identity with the deity.

In the course of most of the offerings and services that constitute worship, the deity is treated like a human guest embodied in its image, and the ritual reinforces the deity's embodiment in a physical form resembling the worshiper's own. Moreover, since the offerings and services are enjoyed by the deity alone, the separation between deity and worshiper has not yet disappeared. The partial exception to this is the display of lamps, an intangible service seen by both deity and worshiper. In many acts of worship, the lamp service precedes the food offering (as in table 1); in many others, as in the Minakshi temple and most south Indian cases, it follows it. Very frequently, however, in the ritual as performed by Hindus today, *puja* is closed by waving a camphor flame either by itself or in conjunction with other lights.

Showing the camphor flame is the climax of worship and, as mentioned above, it synecdochically represents the entire ritual. Quite commonly, an *arati*, a service of lights that includes a camphor flame, is performed by itself as a standard temple ritual. It is true that a camphor flame is not always shown and the lamp service may include only lamps, or sometimes long wicks, burning oil or ghee. Nonetheless, as Logan argues (ibid.: 124), camphor has particularly powerful symbolic properties because it burns with a very strong light and fragrance. The flame symbolizes both the deity's embodiment during *puja*, by appealing directly to the physical senses, as well as the deity's transcendence of its embodied form, for the burning camphor, which leaves no sooty residue, provides an intangible display of incandescent light and fragrance. As the all-consuming flame acts upon the senses of the worshiper, as well as of the deity, it simultaneously symbolizes the total disembodiment of the human worshiper. And although the deity was and remains in an embodied form, to be treated like a human guest, this state is now partly dissolved, so that both deity and worshiper together can transcend their embodied forms. When a camphor flame is shown at the climax of *puja*, therefore, the divine and human participants are most fully identified in their common vision of the flame and hence in their mutual vision of each other—the perfect *darshana*. God has become man and a person, transformed, has become god; they have been merged and their identity is then reinforced when the worshiper cups the hands over the camphor flame, before touching the fingertips to the eyes. By this means, the deity's power and benevolent, protective grace, now in the flame, are transmitted to the worshiper and absorbed through the eyes, again the crucial organs. In principle, moreover, all who see and touch the flame participate in the identification, for they also benefit from the transformation undergone by the worshiper who is often, as in a temple, a priest whose place cannot be taken by ordinary devotees.

Light, most especially the camphor flame, is thus an extraordinarily potent condensed symbol of the quintessentially Hindu idea, implied by its polytheism, that divinity and humanity can mutually become one another, despite the relative separation between them that normally prevails in this world where men and women live and must die. So it is fitting, too, that the camphor flame, through which the identity of deity and worshiper is achieved, should also stand for the whole ritual of *puja*.

The *Prasada*

At the end of the Minakshi temple worship, the priest brings the camphor flame to the waiting devotees and also gives them white ash or red powder, which they normally put on the forehead, although a little ash may be swallowed. The priest usually keeps a stock of ash and powder in a little bag, but ideally he has taken them from the images' feet. The ash and powder are kinds of *prasada*, literally meaning "grace," and the distribution of *prasada* is the indispensable sequel to all acts of worship in popular Hinduism.

There are several different types of *prasada*. Ash and powder are normally handed out in south Indian temples of Shiva and his consort, but in Vishnu's temples the principal item is a little consecrated water, some to be sprinkled over the head and some to be swallowed. Water and other liquids used in bathing rituals are similarly taken by devotees to be sprinkled or sipped, and flowers that have been placed on the images during worship may be presented to devotees at the end. Other examples could be added, but in many contexts—in temples, houses, or elsewhere—the main type of *prasada* is food that has been offered to the deity during worship and is subsequently eaten by priests, attending devotees, lay worshipers, or indeed anyone else, such as absent friends or relatives to whom it has been sent. In the literature on popular Hinduism, *prasada* is often defined as sanctified food, but this is an error; *prasada*, despite the undoubted importance of food, comprises a wide range of sanctified substances.

Prasada is the material symbol of the deities' power and grace. During *puja*, different substances—ash, water, flowers, food, or other items—have been transferred to the deity, so that they have been in contact with the images or, as with food, have been symbolically consumed by the deity in its image form. As a result, these substances have been ritually transmuted to become *prasada* imbued with divine power and grace, which are absorbed or internalized when the *prasada* is placed on the devotee's body or swallowed. Whenever *puja* is concluded by waving a camphor flame, taking in the *prasada* is a process that replicates and consolidates the transfer of divine power and grace through the immaterial medium of the flame. Hence the flame and *prasada* together divinize the human actor to achieve the identity between deity and worshiper (including nonparticipatory devotees), which completes the transformation initiated by the offerings and services made during *puja*.

Because food *prasada* is actually eaten, it most strikingly symbolizes human internalization of divine qualities and the "physiological engagement" between deity and devotee, to borrow from a slightly different setting a phrase of Lawrence A. Babb (1987: 69). No doubt, the powerful and patent symbolism of eating explains the prominence of food as *prasada*. In some Vaishnava cults in particular, the offering of food and its consumption as *prasada* are highly elaborated. But other items can be swallowed as well, and all *prasada* is absorbed by the body, literally or figuratively, so that food *prasada* has no unique efficacy. Moreover, the ritual in its entirety—the *puja* plus the taking of *prasada*—is required to effect the ideal merging of deity and worshiper.

The structure of Hindu worship also suggests that the identification of deity and human is sustainable for only a short period, despite the mutual vision through the camphor flame and the divine power and grace absorbed from the *prasada*. The normal temporariness of the state of identity is aptly marked by the impermanence of almost all the main materials used. Liquids used in bathing rituals drain away; flowers on the decorated images quickly fade and lose their scent; incense, oil, and camphor all disappear in smoke; foodstuffs are consumed; and the ash, powder, or water smeared or sprinkled on the person at the end rapidly rub off or evaporate. Taking *prasada* does not prolong the identity of the divine and human for very long. The whole ritual then has to be repeated and, in a sense, there is so much repetitive worship in Hinduism precisely because it has so much obsolescence built into it. Hence, although *puja* ideally brings about identification between deity and worshiper, the very need for the ritual and its repeated performance are themselves testimony to the relative differentiation of the divine and human that is an ever-present reality for most people most of the time. In the divine world, we are told, flower garlands do not fade, but in this world where men and women blink and die, they do (Blackburn 1985: 256).

Worship and Social Hierarchy

All Hindu rituals, as I stressed in chapter 1, are about relationships among members of Indian society, as well as between them and their deities. *Puja* is obviously no exception, and how different sets of social relationships among priests, lay worshipers, and devotees are reflected, expressed, and constructed through worship could be discussed from many angles. However, I shall focus on two particular problems that have stimulated anthropological discussion: the connection between *puja* and social hierarchy, and the relationship of *puja* with precedence and kingship.

The terms of the first problem are initially given by the importance of purity and pollution in Hindu society. With more or less analytical sophistication, some writers have argued that the relationship between dei-