

Darsan

Seeing the Divine Image in India

By Diana L. Eck

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115 PAGES

Professor Diana L. Eck's *Darsan* is a fine articulation of the connotations of the art of 'seeing,' which is central to Hindu religious thought and practice through the ages. In many Indian languages, in the secular, social context, 'seeing' signifies a formal visit or a social call on an elderly relative or newborn baby, or a visitor from another place. But in the religious context *Darsan*, as Professor Eck aptly identifies and illustrates, offers the devotee an intimate communion with the divine and at the same time provides for the Hindu, a common quest, and for many, a reason for existence in this culturally, linguistically, and geographically diverse society.

Darsan is a Sanskrit word for which an English equivalent, especially one that embodies the religious connotations of the word, is hard to find, and the author's erudition and intuition offers us a comprehensive, yet in-depth exploration of the multilayered meanings of the term. She juxtaposes the sensuous nature of Hindu worship with the otherworldliness for which Hindu theology is renowned, and shows how the concept of *Darsan* makes known the sensuality in Hindu spirituality. *Darsan* also functions as a medium which clarifies the monotheistic philosophy embedded in a pantheon of gods with the principle of oneness hidden in the multiplicity of deities and the multiple limbs of gods, thus emphasizing the message of unity underlying this diversity.

For educators who include Indian literature in their teaching canon, the book offers a wealth of possibilities. Not only does it answer intriguing fundamental contradictions that one encounters in Hindu religious thought, but it also helps one understand the underlying philosophical principles that sanction image worship in Hinduism. The multifold layers of perception focus on the eyes serving as the vehicles for viewing the unblinking gaze of the gods, a ritual that vested on the gods the obligation to keep their eyes open all the time to protect the world. The images underwent an elaborate consecration process to ensure that the gods gazed kindly at mankind. "Seeing" in Hindu religious context forms an integral component of the whole process of worship, *pūja*, that includes the burning of incense, chanting of verses, partaking of *prasād*, food that has been sanctified by the gods, and finally touching the deity itself or an object belonging to the deity. *Darsan* thus entailed a highly sensual and reciprocal relationship between god and man.

The author's technique of posing questions and providing plausible responses serves as a very effective narrative tool. The unobtrusive use of Sanskrit words along with their definitions

appropriately illustrates the point—helps the reader savor the full meaning of the idea as closely as possible to the original. The author not only provides appropriate translations, but also the etymology of the word.

While to the practicing Hindu the book offers the theological basis for the rituals associated with *Darsan*, for the general reader the book unlocks an integral aspect of Hindu religious thought. The author's thoughtful addition of illustrative photographs captures the essence of image worship.

The "Afterword: Seeing the Divine Image in America" illustrates in great detail the Hindus' pursuit of *Darsan* in the United States and elucidates the fundamental principle of reciprocity—the devotee alone is not expected to undertake a pilgrimage to "see" the deity, but God also blesses the devotee's home by having a temple built for the divine. Another notable addition to the numerous temples in the United States is the Hindu Temple of Atlanta, which had its *Kumbabishekam* performed in 1991, and functions not only as a place of worship but also as the heart of the Indian community by hosting cultural and social events at regular intervals. ■

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BOOKS RECEIVED LIST

Books listed here were recently received by the editors. Normally, we do not plan reviews of titles on this list.

Asia General

- Chua, Beng-Huat, ed. *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
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China and Taiwan

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Johnson, Graham E. and Glen D. Peterson. *Historical Dictionary of Guangzhou (Canton) and Guangdong*. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1999.
Jones, Charles Brewer. *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660–1990*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999.
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Japan

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South Asia

- Ahmad, Aijaz. *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia*. New York: Verso, 2000.

Southeast Asia

- Strathern, Andrew and Pamela J. Stewart. *Arrow Talk: Transaction, Transition, and Contradiction in New Guinea Highlands History*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2000.