CHAPTER SEVEN

THE GURU’S ESSENCE AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT

As explained in Chapter 1, cognitive theory links charismatic representations to essentialist modes of thinking. Essentialism, i.e., the attribution of an underlying, hidden essence to biological species, race, gender, kinship and the like, is a widely recurrent mode of understanding and a strategy for thinking about many aspects of the world (Gelman and Hirschfeld 1999). Essentialist concepts are universally used to account for constancy over variation. The paradigm cases of surprising variation over time are provided by our biological environment: for instance, a seed turns into a tree, a baby into an adult, a hairy caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly. One can repeatedly observe how much the qualities of the biological species can vary, and yet occur predictably, sequentially and spontaneously over and over again. Nevertheless, the mechanism that produces these idiosyncratic changes is not obvious. Similarly, one can observe how two seeds of the same tree turn into very different specimens in different environments. One may be tall and slim, the other short and wide, while it is unmistakably the same species. Again, what exactly they have in common may sometimes not be so obvious. Of such observable phenomena, humans have developed concepts that include a notion of a hidden, causally efficacious essence. Essences are those hidden, identity-determining aspects that remain unchanged during morphological transformations, growth, reproduction and the like (ibid., 426).

Essentialism, then, is a mode of understanding that relies upon hidden, partly unknown essences. The psychologists Susan Gelman and Lawrence Hirschfeld list six properties that essences share, regardless of the domain to which they belong (ibid., 427):

1) A non-visible part/substance/quality in each individual (as an individual or as a member of a category)
2) The part/substance/quality is inherent and very difficult to remove.
3) The part/substance/quality has the property of transferability.
4) The transfer from parent/host to offspring/client does not diminish the amount of essence or its consequences for identity in the parent/host.
5) The non-visible part/substance/quality has vast, diffuse and unknown causal implications.
6) The implications include authenticity and identity.

Thus abstracted, the essentialist principles can more easily be detected in non-biological domains. Intriguingly, Gelman and Hirschfeld postulate that various cultural ideas, such as contamination, fetishes and blessings, also depend tacitly on essentialist reasoning (ibid., 427–28). As an example, they take the case of Hitler’s sweater and the Pope’s robe. While most people would feel uncomfortable with the idea of wearing Hitler’s sweater, many seem particularly keen on getting a chance to touch the Pope’s vestment. The importance that people spontaneously attach to physical contact in these cases only makes sense from an essentialist perspective. Furthermore, the idea that people seldom can fully explicate what they expect the causal implications to be in these cases is consistent with essentialist reasoning. It is also thought that whatever it is that is special about Hitler’s sweater, it is almost impossible to remove from the object without completely destroying it.

According to Pascal Boyer (1994), there exists a characteristic human tendency to employ essence-based understandings even in the case of those social categories that are institutionally defined as based upon criteria and qualifications (see Ch. 7). As we saw in Chapter 2, Prabhupāda actually defined his own role through strictly criteria-based interpretation. In this chapter we will examine whether disciples actually limited themselves to such interpretations or if there can be found essentialist thinking behind representations of Prabhupāda’s charisma.

This chapter also examines the role played by religious experience in the formation of the essentialist notions of Prabhupāda. As we shall see, the moods and feelings produced either in routine rituals or unique encounters with Prabhupāda form an integral component of the representations disciples formed of him. The description and analysis of the ISKCON morning programme in Chapter 4 revealed that the rituals and their effects show marked features of the doctrinal mode of religiosity. The highly routinised rituals do not seem capable of producing special and memorable religious experiences that could be encoded in episodic memory. Rather, as we have seen, the rituals aim at producing a special “taste” that the devotees relish. However, the encounters with Prabhupada frequently also evoked feelings in the devotees that they tried to account for by essentialist notions.