CHAPTER 13

Ritual Observed: Notes on the Structure of an Image Installation

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The old woman sitting on the bench muttered quick sentences, her eyes fixed on the image in the shrine. She spoke Bhojpuri, fast, with a sense of urgency, and she had no teeth or dentures, which rendered her words almost entirely incomprehensible to me. The woman did not seem to be praying, nor was she reciting any of the popular hymns dedicated to the simian deity. Initially I thought that she was talking to the shrine owner who used to perform his elaborate morning worship sitting on the cool marble tiles, half-hidden behind the shrine's entrance. Passing by the old woman I noticed that there was no one else there: her words were directed to Hanumān. She spoke softly, beseechingly, and every now and then she paused as if waiting for an answer, only to resume the imaginary conversation after a few moments of listening. The image standing in the shady depths of the small room had half-closed eyes. With the corners of the mouth turned slightly upwards, the deity's statue looked as if it was smilingly encouraging this faithful devotee to continue speaking. Dressed in color-coordinated, exquisite-looking silk clothing, Hanumān stood in a relaxed tribhaṅga posture, leaning gracefully on a silver club. The shining ornaments on his upper arms and ankles and his bejewelled crown underlined his royal appearance. The old woman's intimate conversation partner seemed to exude an air of benevolent might.

This scene took place in 2014, on one of the southernmost ghāṭs of Vārāṇasī. I had witnessed the ritual installation of this Hanumān statue almost two decades earlier, and had been following the site's history closely ever since. From the moment the image was carried into its abode on a torrid July afternoon in 1995, a small but constant stream of devotees had been visiting the shrine regularly over the years. The performance of the three-day installation ritual had obviously generated the desired effects, transforming an artful sandstone sculpture of a popular deity into a ‘living’ image worthy of worship. The consecration of temple images belongs—together with life-cycle rituals, initiations and ordinations—to a category of complex South Asian
rituals where efficacy is not only highly relevant but also immediately palpable: wedding rituals generate lasting unions; through initiations, initiands become initiates into a certain lineage of doctrines and practices; ordinations transform aspiring novices into fully fledged members of monastic communities. In a similarly straightforward manner, an image consecration is performed in order to bring about a permanent, materially contained presence of a deity. In the case of this small Hanumān temple there seems to have been no doubt in the minds of the god’s worshippers that the procedure of infusing life into the image (prāṇapraṇiṣṭhā) was successful, ‘this’ Hanumān becoming thus for them—along with hundreds of ‘other’ Hanumāns in Vārāṇasi alone—a seat of the deity’s all-encompassing power and a focal point for ritual activities.

In the academic study of religions, the issue of efficacy has been a major concern in theoretical approaches to ritual. In both classical and more recent works of anthropology and sociology, religious/ritual actions have been described in terms of a fundamental dichotomy between mere symbolic-expressive acts and others that are (functionally) effective.1 Such approaches have often been complemented by the differentiation between an emic and an etic perspective on ritual work and efficacy (Sax 2010). More recent approaches have attempted to move the question of ritual efficacy to the background, emphasizing the non-rationality (Goody 1961), meaninglessness (Staal 1979), or intentionality (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994) of ritual activity. However, for certain instances of ritual, such as the installation of temple images, the efficacy question is constitutive and needs therefore to be addressed explicitly.

A highly useful point of departure for analyzing image consecrations and questions related to their efficacy is the approach proposed by Stanley Tambiah (1979 and 1985), who states that rituals ‘achieve a change of state, or do something effective’ by virtue of their performance, if enacted felicitously, ‘under the appropriate conditions’ (1985: 79). Tambiah relies on J.L. Austin’s (1962) linguistic theory and his postulate of an ‘illocutionary force’ in communicative acts. Weddings, initiations, ordinations, and image consecrations are thus ‘performatively efficacious’ rituals if performed correctly and if they conform to certain other felicity conditions that are closely tied to their social dimension: According to Tambiah (1979: 127), in order to be efficacious, rituals are required to conform to certain social conventions, something that is also a decisive factor for their legitimacy.2 Here too, Tambiah is in tune with speech act theory: regarding the force of speech acts, Austin specifies that

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1 For recent discussions of ritual efficacy see Podemann Sørensen 2006, Sax et al. 2010, Quack and Töbelmann 2010, Töbelmann 2013.
2 See also Bell 1992: 41.