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by Ruth Vanita

Miracle behind the miracle

OVER the last three weeks, the media have been flooded with hysterical denunciations of the feeding of milk to images of certain deities. Several columnists for the *Indian Express* mocked at the idea that there was anything miraculous about this mass feeding of the gods. Leftists were somewhat perplexed to find that right-wing Hindu leaders were equally vociferous in denouncing the feeding as irrational superstition. Actually, there was nothing surprising about this — religious authorities have always been extremely suspicious of manifestations of popular mysticism when these are beyond their control.

I deliberately use the term “feeding” rather than “drinking” because the significance of the phenomenon seems to me to lie in the feelings of the participants rather than in the phenomenon of reception. Those who attempted to debunk the phenomenon concentrated on proving that there are scientific explanations for the absorption of milk by the images. Their approach was an either/or one: either this is a miracle with no scientific explanation or there is a scientific explanation and therefore it is not a miracle. This black versus white approach was based on a view of human beings as either rational or irrational — either they are “hysterical” (significantly, the word hysteria derives from a word meaning the womb, and thus relates to women) superstitious idiots at the mercy of their emotions or they are rational, intelligent beings with scientific explanations for everything including life, death and emotions. Apparently, it is impossible to be both rational and emotional, scientific and spiritual.

What struck me as “miraculous” in the

sense of “out-of-the-ordinary” about the phenomenon was the way masses of people of different ages, genders, educational backgrounds, classes, castes and even religious communities (there were reports of Sikhs, Muslims and Christians participating) joined in the feeding. People returned from temples, feeling happy that they had “fed” the gods — *pila aye* was their description as often as *pirahe hain*.

In all societies, places of worship provide spaces where relative equality is experienced by participants. This is partly because an offering of a leaf, a flower, a drop of water (to quote the *Gita*) or of a widow’s dime (to quote the *Bible*) is supposed to be as acceptable as huge and ostentatious offerings. Denouncers of the feeding repeatedly castigated it as a waste and asked why the milk could not have been fed to poor children. If they had bothered to watch what was going on, they would have seen many poor children and parents participating in the feeding. Do we seriously think that the couple of teaspoons of milk offered by each person would have solved India’s poverty problem?

It is only the rich who think of the poor as perpetually stretching out their hands to take. This is not necessarily the self-view of all poor people. Their own ability to give and to be generous is an ability much valued by the poor. In order to take without loss of dignity, one needs to be able to give, somewhere, at some time. To give beyond one’s means has always been a way of showing love. Occasional extravagance of this kind acts as a reminder that people live not by bread alone but by the spirit — by art, by the imagination. The argument against

waste can logically be extended to ask why a society as poor as ours should spend money on such luxuries as the fine arts, flower cultivation, or even the media and higher education. Presumably all of these are less important than food.

The other objection raised by critics — that god should give, not take, since god needs nothing, arises from viewing god as outside, and separate from, the worshipper. Even within such a dualistic view, the worshipper imitates god in the act of giving. In the mystical view (most clearly in Hindu thought but present in other mysticisms as well), the divine impulse is both inside and

energy — energy in the universe and energy in the worshipper. The ritual performed before the icon has larger symbolic meaning because it inspires action in the everyday world as well. Feeding the gods has always been connected with feeding other centres. This is expressed most directly in the *prasad* ritual but it is important to remember that in all traditional religions, auspicious occasions are celebrated by feeding humans. The gods fed on September 21 included representations of men, women, children (Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha) and animals (Nandi and the Nag). Those who attacked the

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outside the worshipper so that giving and receiving set up an unbroken circuit. This is in part the meaning of Sri Krishna’s statement in the *Gita*, to the effect that he is the one who gives, the one who receives and also the act of giving. The need to give is the worshipper’s need, experienced as much by the poor as by the rich, and the graciousness of the recipient lies in the willingness to accept what is perhaps superfluous. Emotional needs, such as the need to give, cannot be logically explained.

To see the feeding as directed towards insentient stones by superstitious fools is to altogether miss the symbolic significance of icons. An icon is a symbol of

feeding phenomenon most vociferously are likely to find, if they undertake a survey, the traditional religious families generally feed the poor on birthdays and anniversaries along with newer forms of celebration such as parties while the new rationalists have completely given up the older practice and taken on the new. A traditional Brahman family of my acquaintance has quietly substituted the feeding of Brahmins on auspicious occasions with feeding lepers at an ashram. Go into the Jama Masjid area, especially at festivals, and you will find Muslim families making arrangements with *halwais* there to feed the poor.

These are the people who believe that “He who giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord”. It is all very well to constantly attack the government for not eradicating poverty but in the meantime, there is something to be said for trying to alleviate it ourselves.

Assuming that everything in the universe has a scientific explanation, there is nevertheless, simultaneously, a miraculous quality to much that happens in the universe. Science itself often feels like a miracle, as many leading scientists themselves acknowledge. The human brain which generates science and art no doubt operates scientifically but that does not mean that the brain of an Einstein or a Kalidasa or of any one of us is not a miracle.

When we look at phenomena in the universe and at human beings as completely non-miraculous objects functioning according to mechanical laws, they appear to us valuable not in themselves but only insofar as they are useful. On the other hand, to acknowledge the miraculousness of entities and activities is to recognise their value even when they are not immediately useful.

The particular activity involved in this case — that of feeding — is crucially valuable. In a society which is increasingly beginning to value eating over feeding, conspicuous consumption over giving, the feeding of milk by masses of people in unison was a much-needed reminder of the importance of this traditional activity.

In the very difficult conditions we live in today, where getting a ration card or clean drinking water feels like a miracle, people’s continuing willingness to be generous, to give, to expend, to extend, is indeed a miracle. It is a reassertion of faith in the possibility of abundance and the aspiration towards it.