

WHEN THE GODS DRINK MILK!
EMPIRICISM AND BELIEF IN CONTEMPORARY HINDUISM

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The permeability of the boundary between religion and politics in India has already been highlighted in many studies. In reality, ever since Independence, the separation established by the Indian constitution between these two central domains of social life has always been rather tenuous. But it is only during the last two decades that a large-scale movement openly questioning the principle has emerged. In effect, political parties appealing to Hinduism have been making a concerted attempt to turn it into the more or less explicit basis for a national state culture, which would replace the purely secular ideals prevailing until now.¹

The separation between religion and politics is not, however, the most decisive factor in defining our modernity. A more fundamental distinction is the one which has been progressively drawn between beliefs in all their variability on the one hand and, on the other, the scientific approach, which in contrast bases its legitimacy on both its universality and its axiomatic autonomy with respect to all cultural presuppositions.² Yet, in contrast to the connotations generally associated with questioning the distinction between religion and politics, the critique of scientific autonomy in relation to culture or religion today often appears as a 'progressive' cause. An 'objectivist' concept of nature is frequently opposed—in India as elsewhere—in the name of alternative environmentalist approaches, which claim to have their roots in local cultures and practices. This is often the case, for example, when conflicts which raise ecological questions occur, such as the Chipko

¹ On the ideology of Hindu nationalism, see Christophe Jaffrelot, *Les Nationalistes Hindous: Idéologie, Implantation et Mobilisation des Années 1920 aux Années 1990*, Paris, 1993; Ashis Nandy et al., *Creating a Nationality: The Ramjanmabhumi Movement and Fear of the Self*, Delhi, 1993; Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Berkeley, 1994.

² For a modern discussion of this question, see Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons Jamais été Modernes*, Paris, 1991.

movement or the Narmada project.³ It has become commonplace to value cosmologies which emphasise the sacred in relation to nature, in order to castigate more technocratic approaches to the environment. But what happens when a similar strategy is used in the name of Hinduism, and throughout the world, instead of being deployed on behalf of local or threatened cultures?

I would like to suggest that it is not only the relationship between religion and politics that is controversial in contemporary India. More implicitly but no less significantly, the very relationship between science and religion is being proposed for reformulation. This article is concerned with an event which sheds new light on how science and religion can - rather miraculously - be reconciled in contemporary Hinduism.

A Strange Plebiscite

On 21 September 1995, Indians - both at home and overseas - were invited to take part in a strange plebiscite. The question implicitly asked was: is it conceivable that Hindu gods openly manifest themselves in the world as we know it today? It goes without saying that the procedure did not conform to the rules usually followed in a referendum or a poll. The terms *chamatkār* and 'miracle' (with or without inverted commas) were commonly used to refer to the events of this day.⁴ The final outcome of the consultation is also difficult to assess. But if one can hazard a guess on the basis of available testimony, it seems that public opinion was almost equally divided between those who believed in the miracle and those who did not.⁵

To be sure, people who went to Hindu shrines on 21 September 1995 made an astonishing discovery. These were shrines sacred to the elephant-headed god Ganesh, or Shiva and other deities (Nandi, Parvati) traditionally associated with

³ The Chipko movement is the popular name for the ecological conflict which excited the most interest in India during the 1970s. The movement crystallised around the collective defence led by Himalayan villagers to safeguard their rights in forest areas under state jurisdiction; see A. Mishra and S. Tripathi, *Chipko Movement*, Delhi, 1978. The Narmada project is a gigantic irrigation scheme being implemented in western India; it includes the construction of numerous dams which will in turn lead to the displacement of tens if not hundreds of thousands of people. The project has become one of the most serious ecological conflicts of the last decade; see Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley*, Delhi, 1995.

⁴ The connotations of the term *chamatkār* - as used in Hindi but also in the majority of other Indian languages - are actually closer to 'wonder' than to 'miracle' as that word is often understood.

⁵ Thus, for example, according to an opinion poll carried out for *The Times of India* among 1,548 people in the main Indian cities, 67 per cent of respondents in Calcutta, 63 per cent in Delhi and 55 per cent in Bombay thought that it was a miracle. In the south, by contrast, 67 per cent of respondents in Madras, 55 per cent in Hyderabad and 68 per cent in Bangalore aligned themselves with scientific and rationalist opinion on the matter. *The Times of India*, Bombay, 7 October 1995.

Ganesh.⁶ On that day, the deities' images agreed to 'really' drink the milk offered to them as an oblation. Such a phenomenon, however, must be placed within its Hindu context. In India, it is not uncommon for deities to manifest themselves explicitly to their devotees in a variety of forms or by means of miracles. It is also common that such manifestations are realised through their images.

In the Himalayan region of India where I worked in the early 1980s, such manifestations were so common that they hardly attracted the attention of devotees.⁷ And when I was carrying out research in the Old Delhi market area in 1994, almost all activity came to a stop for an entire afternoon in one of the liveliest quarters of the city following the discovery of a miracle linked to an image of Hanuman worshipped in a small neighbourhood temple.⁸ On the next day, however, the incident was hardly mentioned in the local newspapers. It is therefore likely that the discovery of a milk-drinking image of Ganesh would have provoked only limited interest if it had been an isolated incident, or even if it had occurred in only a few of this deity's shrines. Moreover, there are several shrines in India whose fame is owed to the way in which a divine image agrees to 'drink' the devotees' offerings. Kal Bhairav's shrine in Ujjain is one example, although in this case, alcohol, not milk, is offered to the god.

The event of 21 September nevertheless assumed unusual importance, precisely because it did not take place in one shrine only, or in just a handful of them. The miracle could be observed everywhere at images of Ganesh and other deities linked to Shiva, in temples as well as in family shrines, both in India and throughout the world, and by both devotees and people curious enough to carry out the experiment. Thus, in the evening of that day, it is estimated that several million people had personally tried to offer milk to a divine image and - according to various sources - a significant number of them were convinced that the deities actually drank the offered milk. The event received media coverage in India and throughout the world as probably no other such event had ever done. The media played a pivotal role not only in the controversy over the miracle, but also in broadcasting news of the event on the very day it happened.

The Swami and the Rationalists

Where and how was the discovery made? And above all, how did the news spread so quickly that Ganesh and other Hindu deities were agreeing to drink the milk offered to them from spoons? Even today, it is difficult to answer these questions,

⁶ Associated with Ganesh there is a mythology which is both rich and diverse, in part very old but some of it much more recent. Ganesh is generally considered to be the son of Shiva and Parvati, two of the central deities of the Hindu pantheon. On Ganesh and his cult, see R.L. Brown, ed., *Ganesh: Studies of an Asian God*, Delhi, 1992.

⁷ Denis Vidal, 'Une Négociation Agitée: Essai de Description d'une Situation d'interaction Entre des Hommes et des Dieux', *Études Rurales*, Nos 107-8, 1987, pp. 71-83.

⁸ Denis Vidal, 'Converting Histories: Hindu and Muslim Narratives', *Economic News and Views*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1995.

and probably not just because we lack the findings of the enquiry ordered from the intelligence agencies by the Indian government on the very same day.⁹

By manifesting themselves simultaneously in every country of the world inhabited by Indians, the Hindu deities may have succeeded in performing the first-ever miracle in tune with an era haunted by the slogan of globalisation. Chandraswami, however, was certainly not someone who could be disconcerted by such cosmopolitanism. This guru - who in 1996 was in jail awaiting judgement - has boasted of his tantric powers and, in the last few years, has been one of the most prominent members of the small cohort of 'holy men' who have, now as never before, long been swirling around Indian politics and politicians. Formerly an active member of the Congress Party before he discovered his true vocation, Chandraswami was able to benefit from his long-standing intimate relationship with the former Prime Minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao, as well as with numerous other politicians. He was also in close contact with Adnan Kashoggi (the notorious Iranian arms dealer), as well as with the Sultan of Brunei, Pamela Bordes, and more generally a whole galaxy of celebrities throughout the world. If rumours spread about him are to be believed, at the height of his career he boasted of being in direct contact with 153 statesmen! That the name of Chandraswami has been regularly appearing in newspapers is primarily due to the astonishing number of scandals in which he has been involved, in one way or another, during the course of his long career.

Throughout his many press interviews, the swami justified his closeness to power by invoking ancient Hindu traditions: 'The country's tradition has been that kingdom and religion are inextricably interlinked'.¹⁰ Yet, this is certainly not the same tradition as that invoked by Sanal Edamaruku, President of the Indian Rationalist Association (IRA), who succeeded his father in the post several years ago. When, on that morning of 21 September, he was contacted by journalists and asked to comment upon the event, he did not content himself with denouncing the miracle as a mere fake; instead, together with his rationalist friends, he conducted a rapid enquiry which enabled him - so he claimed - to trace the exact course of events. He thus seems to have been the first to establish a direct link between the source of the miracle and Chandraswami. Perhaps Sanal Edamaruku had not fully

⁹ 'Sources said intelligence agencies had been ordered to inquire into the reason behind the phenomenon. The agencies had also been asked to find out how the phenomenon took place at the same time - all over the country. At the moment, senior officials are "foxed", sources added. The Ministry had also asked for a video-recording of the phenomenon.' *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 22 September 1995.

¹⁰ 'I am a follower and disciple of the tradition laid down by Vashisht Vishwamitra. The country's tradition has been that kingdom and religion are inextricably interlinked. The relationship of the raja (king) with the rishi (ascetic) and rajniti (politics) with dharma (religion) is like that of the shareer (body) with the atma (soul). They are inseparable. Take Chanakya and Chandragupta, we have a history of politics linked with religion.' Interview with Chandraswami, *India Today*, 31 October 1995, p. 53.

anticipated that the swami might not be altogether displeased with his enquiry and might even derive some glory from it.¹¹

Hindu Militants and their Opponents

Hindu militants were among those most irritated by Chandraswami's apparent claim - supported by the rationalists' involuntary assistance - to ownership of the miracle. To the militants, Chandraswami was just an agent of the Congress, and many of their speeches made clear that they were particularly outraged at his daring claim. Their own interpretation was far grander. One of the general secretaries of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Giriraj Kishore, sent faxes to all newspapers in the country stating that the divine intervention heralded a new era for Hinduism.¹² This interpretation was congruent with a rumour which had circulated since early morning in Punjab, according to which the miracle heralded the descent of a new *avatār* upon earth.¹³ Activists of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) also made their intense satisfaction manifest throughout the country.¹⁴ Albeit in a somewhat more reserved tone, the miracle's authenticity was also confirmed by the majority of politicians affiliated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), including A. B. Vajpayee and L. K. Advani, even though, in particular, they showed the reserve appropriate to ambitious future statesmen.¹⁵

It should, however, be noted that a minority of militants and politicians, more or less closely linked with the Hindu parties, reacted in the opposite way and did not hesitate to denounce the miracle as a hoax. Their attitude well reflects the deep ambivalence towards rationality and science among many Hindu ideologues.¹⁶

¹¹ *The Pioneer*, Chandigarh, 22 September 1995.

¹² The Vishva Hindu Parishad was founded in 1964-66. It is perhaps the most radical of the militant, Hindu nationalist organisations, although it claims to confine itself exclusively to the religious domain. It played a particularly active role in the campaign to destroy the mosque in Ayodhya; see Jaffrelot, *Les nationalistes hindous*, pp. 413-38; Nandy *et al.*, *Creating a Nationality*, pp. 86-95.

¹³ *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 22 September 1995; *The Pioneer*, Chandigarh, 22 September 1995. It does not, however, seem to have been very clear whether it was supposed to have been a manifestation of the final *avatār* of Vishnu signalling the end of the *Kaliyuga* era or even of an *avatār* of Shiva. In complete contrast, some astrologers - as well as a famous Jain ascetic - saw in this an inauspicious omen.

¹⁴ "From the miracle, it is obvious that there is God in idols, something we have wanted to prove for so long", said one RSS leader. *The Hindustan Times*, Delhi, 1 October 1995.

¹⁵ A.B. Vajpayee became the acting prime minister of India for exactly 13 days, following the election of May 1996. At that time, the BJP did not manage to forge the political alliances which would have allowed it to make up a parliamentary majority so as to remain in power. Because the BJP, with its close allies, had only 194 seats out of the parliamentary total of 534, it immediately had to give up its leadership of the country, even though it had been formally invited to form a government as the party with the largest number of seats after the election.

¹⁶ Thus, for example, in Bombay Bal Thackeray, the leader of the Shiv Sena, declared that it was a hoax in language at least as forceful as the president of the Rationalist Association,

Although such an attitude is regularly condemned among their opponents - who are then identified with the capital sin of secularism - these ideologues have no hesitation in resorting to scientism when circumstances demand it.¹⁷ Moreover, the argument that Hindu culture is itself an unrecognised exemplar of a great scientific tradition has been constantly used by supporters of Hindu nationalism since the nineteenth century. The emphasis laid upon the 'scientificity' of methods enabling the attainment of greater 'spirituality' in the Hindu tradition is also a recurring theme in the propaganda of new sects and gurus, often closely linked to the VHP, who target the middle classes and overseas Hindu communities in particular.¹⁸

Most ironic, however, is that the openly acknowledged adversaries of the Hindu organisations were unwilling to accept that that day's events should be reduced to the trivial manipulation of a man such as Chandraswami. That seemed to them to be making it too easy for these organisations, which could then rid themselves of all direct responsibility. Moreover, the speeches made by the spokesmen of the Hindu organisations did nothing but confirm the suspicion of everyone who was already convinced of their direct involvement in the day's developments.

It should be pointed out that much of the evidence seemed to support this thesis. For instance, it was noted that one of the places where the miracle had first taken place before dawn was Jhandawala Park temple, one of the main shrines controlled by the RSS in Delhi.¹⁹ More generally, the first manifestations were often reported in VHP-sponsored shrines, both in India and abroad. Many observers also noted the fairly close correspondence between the geographical spread of the miracle and the main areas in which the Hindu parties are most influential.²⁰ Thus, the miracle spread in north India from Delhi and Punjab, whereas by contrast, it was less frequent in the south, where the cult of Ganesh himself is less widespread and

whereas another leading member of the Shiv Sena, Manohar Joshi - the Chief Minister of Maharashtra - was one of the first politicians in the city to attest to its veracity. Gopinath Munde, a member of the BJP and the Home Minister in the same state, took a position similar to Thackeray's, for he equally denounced the miracle as purely a product of the devotees' imagination. *The Indian Express*, Delhi, 27 September 1995.

¹⁷ This was particularly the case in the controversies over the destruction of Hindu temples, in which historians and archaeologists close to the Hindu parties resorted to positivism to uphold their point of view.

¹⁸ Thus in her fascinating analysis of the role played by these new sects in the Hindu nationalist movement, Lise McKean describes the Gayatri Parivar's ashram in Hardwar in which a pre-eminent place is given to the 'laboratories' placed just alongside the religious buildings; Lise McKean, *Divine Enterprise: Gurus and the Hindu Nationalist Movement*, Chicago, 1996, p. 51.

¹⁹ *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 26 September 1995. If credence be given to the rumour that news of the miracle spread from Hardwar, it could also be noted that this town has always been one of the homes of Hindu nationalism - particularly since the Hindu Mahasabha was founded there in 1915 - and that several ashrams closely associated with the VHP and the nationalist movement are located there today; cf. McKean, *Divine Enterprise*, ch. 4.

²⁰ The result of the miracle's announcement in Calcutta must be noted, however, for this city is far from being a stronghold of the Hindu parties.

where, too, militant Hindu organisations have almost no influence. Moreover, one of the most remarkable aspects of this event was how fast the news spread amongst expatriate Indian communities throughout the world; among them, the influence of militant Hindu organisations such as the VHP is perhaps greatest.²¹ One final coincidence did not go unnoticed. The miracle took place only a fortnight before the launching of a big propaganda operation, one of the kind that Hindu parties have made a speciality of their own, which take the form of organised processions throughout the country.²² The *ekātmata yātrā*, which the BJP was about to organise with the assistance of the VHP and RSS, was precisely aimed at underlining the country's cultural unity on the basis of Hinduism. Commentators might also have pointed out a bizarre coincidence: the miracle took place almost exactly one hundred years to the day after Tilak initially thought of using the symbol of Ganesh to organise the first such demonstration in favour of militant political Hinduism.²³

The Community of Experimenters

The facts just described appear consistent with an unambiguous interpretation of the miracle, and this is how they were analysed by politicians and political parties sharply opposed to Hindu parties and their ideology, as well as by many journalists in the English-language press. Thus the events of that day were explained away as dubious political manipulation, playing on the people's religious credulity. The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), in particular, broadcast its unequivocal denunciation of the miracle on the very same day. So too did the Congress Party, but only on the next day. In general, though, the reaction of politicians who were not affiliated with the Hindutva movement was rather diverse.

The thesis that the miracle was politically manipulated was advanced in the only study (to my knowledge) which was carried out after the event was no longer receiving media coverage.²⁴ The aim of this analysis was to show that how the news spread cannot be explained without taking into account the covert

²¹ The VHP - whose name puts the emphasis on its worldwide character - started its systematic incursion into overseas Hindu communities from 1970 onwards; see Nandy *et al.*, *Creating a Nationality*, pp. 90-92. However, we need to be able to analyse in more general terms the growing role played by overseas Hindu communities in the evolution of Hinduism, not only in the countries where these communities are found but also in India itself. Such an analysis would presuppose that the role of these communities should be studied within the context of their own development and of the specific part played by religion in it, especially in defining identities; see, for example, Richard Burghart, ed., *Hinduism in Great Britain*, London, 1987.

²² Cf. Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Processions Hindous, Stratégies Politiques et Émeutes Entre Hindous et Musulmans', in Denis Vidal, Gilles Tarabout and Eric Meyer, eds, 'Violences et non-violences en Inde', *Puruṣārtha*, Vol. 16, 1994, pp. 261-87.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

²⁴ Mina Swaminathan, 'A "miracle" Really, but Not Divine', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 52, 30 December 1995.

intervention of powerful and efficient organisations, such as the RSS or VHP, which alone have the resources necessary to plan such a large-scale event. Without denying that such an intervention was possible, and indeed very likely, I would nevertheless like to dispute the way in which Mina Swaminathan argues her case. The core of her analysis rests on identifying the news of the miracle with a 'rumour', which she compares with other instances of rumours broadcast in India during the last decades. According to Swaminathan, it is not so much the speed with which the rumour spread, as the way in which the message was transmitted with no apparent distortion, which provides decisive evidence that the event was staged and that Hindu organisations were involved.

Such an analysis, however, shares a shortcoming common to most of the comments passed on that day's events. The majority treated the miracle and how news of it was broadcast as if these were facts which could be analysed separately. On the one hand, there was a question about who could have spread the rumour so quickly, and on the other, the veracity of the story or the credulity of witnesses needed to be assessed. Yet, the uniqueness of this miracle rests on the impossibility of reducing the way in which knowledge of it spread to the broadcasting of a simple news item or a baseless rumour. What was actually transmitted on that day by word of mouth, and by every other conceivable means, was of an altogether different kind: it was the recounting of an experiment and a call to everyone else to repeat it in turn. The majority of witnesses' reports pointed out that news of the miracle was principally transmitted by people who had themselves seen it, and wanted to relate it to their family and friends, to encourage them to verify it for themselves.²⁵ Each time that people passed on the news, they did not just transmit a message without distorting it; they reactivated and renewed its contents while making it part of their own experience. This was so not only among those who were convinced by the miracle, but also among the most incredulous, who were equally concerned that people should share their view and proposed various counter-experiments.

Some commentators in India were irritated by the manner in which this miracle seemed to confirm stereotypes associated with Hindu religiosity in the eyes of the world.²⁶ They did not notice, however, that the same events gave the lie to another widespread stereotype, which associates Hinduism not only with high spirituality, but also with complete disdain for any empirical reality whatsoever. Yet, if that

²⁵ For example, an Indian resident in the United States told of how he had been contacted six times in a row from India by acquaintances who wanted to persuade him to perform the miracle in the early morning. *The Indian Express*, Chandigarh, 1 October 1995.

²⁶ See, for example, Dilip Cheria in *Daily*, Bombay, 28 September 1995: 'It has been a week marked by the most unprecedented mass hysteria in modern times. The milk-sipping mania has once again placed India back in its place as far as world opinion is concerned. Analysts comfortable with norms they are used to working with will now reinforce their conviction that India moves in mysterious ways. Once again, we are left with the long lingering image of a nation of God men, snake charmers and miracles.'

day's events must be qualified by a single phrase, it would not be 'frenzy' or 'religious hysteria' as journalists had it, but rather 'experimental frenzy'.

From Faith to Evidence

For the majority of people who went to the temples on that day, the event generally seemed to have two aspects. The first was to marvel at (and more rarely to doubt) the reality of the miracle which seemed to unfold before their eyes, and the second was to find out whether the god would agree to drink the milk from their hands. In this respect, the stakes were no different from those in numerous other ritual practices, although in this case they took on a particular dimension because the result was empirically verifiable. Thus, we should not underestimate the importance of such a test, which is to be clearly distinguished from one designed to prove (or to prove to others) that the gods are really present and able to manifest themselves in the world. Indeed, many devotees must never have doubted the deities' ability to perform miracles and they must have been quickly convinced by the milk-drinking miracle's veracity, even before they had personally experienced it. But precisely for this reason, they must have been yet more anxious to find out whether the deities would agree to receive the oblation from their hands. In such circumstances, we can very well imagine that some of them would not have hesitated to tilt their spoons of milk a little for fear of facing a public refusal.

The majority of devotees had no doubt that the failure or success encountered in reproducing the miracle put each individual's faith at stake. Hence, it was not uncommon for those who disputed the miracle's authenticity, or even those who failed to reproduce it, to be reproached for their insufficient faith. But if such a point of view had been shared by everybody without exception, there would be nothing more to say. The devotees would have believed in the miracle, all the while regretting or bemoaning the lack of faith of some of their contemporaries. And the non-believers would have been no less distressed by the naivety of the majority of the population and by how Hindu organisations could exploit it.

Yet, it very rapidly became clear that devotees were not the only ones able to reproduce the miracle. Many people who did not hesitate to express their own incredulity could see the reality of it for themselves. Once the miracle became a fact, not only for devotees but also for sceptics, whose perplexity was further increased, events took on a new dimension, as the evolution of the controversy during that day shows. Very quickly, the question ceased to be only about who could be behind the miracle; instead, the issue came to be whether there truly was no possibility of finding a 'natural' explanation for it.

By the middle of the day, therefore, the miracle had not only been verified throughout the world, but the terms of the debate that it would provoke were well-defined, as the lunchtime television bulletins showed. Viewers could not only see crowds massed in front of temples in nearly every Indian town and city, but the close-ups also showed how the milk offered to the deities would disappear from the spoons held out before their images. Above all, the accounts, reports, reactions and

comments, which followed one after the other, put forward very variable opinions and interpretations, although prominent among them were those that reduced the phenomenon to a simple application of well-known physical laws.

It is impossible to know how many people were convinced by such explanations. Yet one thing is for sure: audience curiosity was further sharpened, and the news on television contributed in turn to spreading the miracle throughout urban India. The number of people visiting the temples increased as the day wore on. Many offices and institutions, including schools, were partially deserted. And while the jams worsened around shrines where crowds were gathering, the atmosphere of the day looked more and more like an improvised religious festival. It was not until midnight, when the last shrines were closed, that the crowds regretfully dispersed.

As knowledge of the miracle spread, the number of experimenters multiplied, and their social and religious backgrounds became more diverse. So, too, did their motivations and the very way in which they conducted the experiments. There is evidence, for example, that many Christians, Sikhs and Muslims mixed with Hindus to reproduce the miracle. H. K. L. Bhagat, a Congress politician, even attempted to counter the Hindu parties on their own ground (albeit rather rhetorically) by seeing in it proof of religious harmony to come.²⁷ If one is also to believe the various accounts given by newspapers throughout the world, the deities' images were not the only ones to absorb the milk offered to them. Several witnesses stated that they had obtained the same result with paintings of Ganesh. Even better, one devotee testified that milk had disappeared from a refrigerator on top of which a representation of the god was placed. By contrast, despondency set in as the image at the entrance to the stock exchange in Delhi refused the milk offered to it, and people in the area tried with no more success to offer it water and fruit juice.²⁸

At first, the news spread that the miracle was connected only with Ganesh. Then it was discovered that various deities associated with Shiva agreed to drink the milk offered to them. But it did not stop there. In Kuala Lumpur, it seems, it was the Virgin Mary - not a Hindu deity - who agreed to drink milk in the same way.²⁹ In contrast, when milk was offered to a statue of Gandhi,³⁰ when it was substituted by alcohol in Patna court,³¹ or even when it was said that Buddha agreed to drink through his ears,³² it was an indisputable sign that scientists and rationalists had joined the game. And at last, when it was also offered to the lions

²⁷ *The Hindustan Times*, Delhi, 23 September 1995.

²⁸ *Press Trust of India*, 21 September 1995.

²⁹ *The Statesman*, Calcutta, 27 September 1995.

³⁰ *Frontline*, 20 October 1995.

³¹ The lawyer who tried the experiment was, moreover, threatened for doing so and legal action was taken against her by the RSS. *The Indian Express*, Bombay, 28 September 1995.

³² *The Pioneer*, 23 September 1995.

in Trafalgar Square (London), there was no longer any room for doubt; the British popular press had joined in as well.³³

In India itself, the miracle lasted for the whole of one day.³⁴ On the following day, the devoted and the curious who went to the temples came out disappointed. Indeed, it seems that no deity would any longer agree to drink the offered milk. An accurate estimate of the number of people who sought to give milk to the deities is impossible, but the total was undoubtedly impressive. Thus, if a poll taken shortly after the event is to be believed, 60 per cent of adults in Delhi, 59 per cent in Calcutta and 49 per cent in Bombay had tried the experiment.³⁵ However much doubt there is about these and other percentages, all the available figures for attendance at the shrines on that day are equally impressive, and to them must be added all the people who tried the experiment at home. Certainly, never in history have so many people turned themselves into impromptu experimenters in order to find out whether the gods existed only in their devotees' eyes, or whether it could be proved to everybody that gods could manifest themselves in the world at will.

Enter Rationality: Scholarly and Scientific Explanations

If the miracle had its origin in a conspiracy, it would make it possible to explain why the milk was to be offered to the deities only from a spoon. Many commentators pointed out that this way of doing it was totally foreign to prevailing traditions.³⁶ But unless the whole world's spoon manufacturers were implicated in the conspiracy, it would be difficult to explain why the milk disappeared from the spoons when they were brought to the deities' mouths. And when it became clear

³³ *Sun*, 23 September 1995. The British popular press would, however, deserve a separate study. On this occasion it, in fact, displayed not only a lot of irony, but also a spirit of tolerance greater than that found, for example, in much of the Indian press.

³⁴ The miracle sometimes lasted for one or two days more in the rest of the world, as it did in the USA, for example. *The Statesman*, Delhi, 24 September 1995.

³⁵ *The Times of India*, Bombay, 6 October 1995.

³⁶ Thus Laloo Prasad Yadav, the Chief Minister of Bihar, sarcastically commented on the innovation: 'Why did Ganesh not drink milk from bucket or other vessel? Why only from spoon? Perhaps God too has become modern in the ages of knives and forks and takes milk only with a spoon' (Guwahati, 13 October 1995). Nonetheless, it is important to note that the wish to renew Hindu rituals - and particularly to simplify them so that they can be carried out more easily in the domestic arena - is one of the VHP's proclaimed objectives; cf. McKean, *Divine Enterprise*, p. 110. Yet this also raises the particularly complex issue of how rituals are to be renewed in contemporary Hinduism, as much in India as abroad; it would certainly be a mistake to see in such renewal only the activity of militant Hindu organisations, more especially because, according to context, it can lead just as much to the simplification of rituals (cf. Burghart, *Hinduism in Great Britain*) as to their complication (cf. C.J. Fuller, 'Priestly Education and the Agamic Ritual Tradition in Contemporary Tamil Nadu', in Jackie Assayag, ed., *The Resources of History: Traditions, Narratives, Nation*, Paris, 1998).

that there was no secret pipework or mysterious vacuum pump in each divine image at which the miracle occurred, scientists were called in.³⁷

The first scientific explanations laid less stress on the phenomenon of surface tension of liquids, which would permit an explanation of why the milk disappeared from the spoons, than on the principles of capillarity, which were supposed to account for how the images could temporarily absorb the milk offered to them. Even though there was no question about the accuracy of these scientific principles, however, many of these explanations then began to seriously fall apart.

It is one thing to demonstrate that the rising of sap in trees and the absorption of milk by images obey the same fundamental principles in theory. It is quite another to insist that such principles really explained what was happening in the shrines. That would imply an even more unrealistic understanding of our environment than the one held by believers in the miracle. For the latter at least, the surrounding world is a stable environment, whose familiar properties are not supposed to change suddenly according to anyone's whim. It was precisely for this reason that the sight of an image suddenly agreeing to drink milk could hardly be explained without supernatural intervention. But if the scientific explanations given by many newspapers were to be believed, confidence in the natural world's stability rapidly evaporated. Thus, it only needed journalists or scientists to be a bit short of the mark in their improvised role as teachers for their explanations to suggest the existence of a rather odd universe, because materials whose use was always linked to their qualities of impermeability and unalterability (marble, metals, etc.) were now being described as if they were veritable sponges ready to greedily absorb whatever liquid was within their reach.

Despite a few false leads, scientists and their spokesmen soon reached a consensus about the explanation of the phenomenon, which depended on different, characteristic properties related to the physics of liquids. The effects of surface tension and siphoning permitted an explanation of why the milk was attracted by the images once placed in contact with them. It was also the effects of surface tension - rather than the property of capillarity linked to the porosity of the materials - which could explain why the milk seemed to be absorbed; a fine layer of liquid, practically invisible to the naked eye, built up and this explained how the milk trickled down to the images' feet unnoticed.

In the days which followed, the scientific analyses became more precise but also more fastidiously conventional. The readers of a well-known magazine were reminded that 'milk - a light fluid, chemically inert under normal circumstances - is the basic element of nutrition for newly-born mammals'. It was clearly stated that all the reports in which Ganesh 'was seen consuming large quantities of milk or was heard noisily swallowing it ... were nothing but pure fantasies'. But it was

³⁷ The reaction of a CPI-M Member of Parliament, Saiffudin Choudhury, well illustrates such an attitude: 'If it has happened, one will have to look for a material interconnection'. *Asian Age*, Delhi, 22 September 1995.

also declared that if one 'poured milk over a stone object, it started flowing down, for this is a law of nature. There is no established law which could possibly explain how the milk can penetrate the solid crystalline structure of the stone in normal ambient conditions'.³⁸ This was less of a contradiction to the interpretation of those who believed in the miracle than many scientific explanations given on the very day.

It is one thing to 'know' which principles of physics account for a phenomenon, but quite another to get them across to a larger audience who know practically nothing about these very principles. In this case, as we have seen, scientists and rationalists had no particular qualms about the nature of the observed phenomenon. If the miracle could be reproduced under their vigilant control or in a laboratory, it would then have been clear that it was either a hoax or that it complied with well-known physical laws. This is why rationalists were ready to offer a sizeable sum to anyone who could prove them wrong. Yet, that was not the problem which they had to face at that point. What they really had to show was how their scientific description could actually apply to the phenomenon which thousands of witnesses claimed to have observed on that day.

The Forms of the Controversy

A Double Discovery

Contrary to the stereotype, a miracle - among all the features associated with religion - is the one which brings belief into play least of all. In no way is it required that those who witness a miracle should themselves be convinced believers. This is probably why the popularity of miracles has never decreased in Indian educated circles. Far from being diminished, the interest provoked by a miracle is actually considerably increased if the witnesses are not all believers themselves, for they are less easily suspected of being 'blinded by devotion'. But these witnesses are expected to testify in good faith, however disconcerting the observed facts may be.³⁹ It is also remarkable that the role assigned to them is in fact very close to that of their equivalents in the early history of experimental science, as Shapin and Schaffer's remarkable book shows for the scientific work of Boyle and his controversy with Hobbes.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Frontline*, Delhi, 20 October 1995.

³⁹ Thus, in a article entitled 'If this is a trick, it fooled me', an English journalist, Rebecca Maer, described how the miracle unfolded in a temple in Southall. 'A photographer from a national tabloid newspaper was right in front of the statue. He said he could see no mechanism to explain the phenomenon, after scrutinising it at length. As a lapsed Catholic, I don't believe in stories of statues of the Virgin Mary shedding tears. Indeed I would say I was as sceptical as anyone - but it's difficult to dismiss something you have seen for yourself.' *Daily Express*, London, 23 September 1995.

⁴⁰ Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life*, Princeton, 1985.

The parallel is all the more attractive, because a curious similarity exists in the tenor of the debates which took place in both cases. Not only were the physical principles of hydrostatics and pneumatics at issue quite similar to each other, but above all one central feature of the controversy provoked by Boyle's experiments on the nature of a vacuum - as in the case of the miracle - pertained to the possibility of detecting leaks in the experimental apparatus. Their detection would in effect raise doubts about the facts which the scientist sought to uncover. Moreover, as Shapin and Schaffer brilliantly show, recognition of the importance of Boyle's discoveries largely depended, at the time, on how the apparatus he had designed was made available across Europe, and above all on the way in which other experimenters could decide - on a very arbitrary basis - that they had carried out an experiment 'identical' to his. It was this which authorised them to confirm or invalidate the results of their own experiments.

The dispute between Hobbes and Boyle also raised the larger question of the status of all experimental practice, that is, to know whether experimental facts can be legitimately upheld, not only when they support rational arguments, but even more when they run against them.⁴¹ Boyle, and several other proponents of 'natural philosophy', did not hesitate to put the experimental method at the service of religion. They declared themselves ready to carry out all sorts of experiments likely to prove the existence of supernatural phenomena, on condition, however, that they were allowed the freedom to make their own conclusions known, regardless of any established authority or dogma.⁴²

Today, though, miracles are not only thought of as exceptions to the usual state of affairs. Perhaps they provoke even more incredulity because they seem to contradict most recognised scientific knowledge. As scientists do not easily believe in such a possibility, they tend to consider miracles as events whose interpretation would be deformed by belief, and whose origins should instead be sought in people's culture and minds. Thus, no miracle will cease to be doubted by scientists simply because it was reported by people in good faith. As Latour notes in one of his books, enthusiasts for miracles and flying saucers - rather than scientists themselves - imagine that it is enough to prove an isolated case to establish the reality of a phenomenon whose existence is scientifically disputed.⁴³

The uniqueness of the miracle, however, lay in the fact that it was not an isolated phenomenon observed by only a few privileged witnesses. Its most distinctive feature lay in the disconcerting ease with which it seemed possible to reproduce it anywhere, supplied only with a deity's image, a spoon and a little milk. Although the miracle encompassed a great variety of experiences, as well as witnesses with very diverse motivations, it was nonetheless considered as a single

⁴¹ On this topic, see also Isabelle Stengers, *L'invention des Sciences Modernes*, Paris, 1995, p. 117.

⁴² Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, ch. 7.

⁴³ Bruno Latour, *La clef de Berlin*, Paris, 1993, p. 164.

phenomenon. In other words, its exceptional nature lay in the fact that, irrespective of opinion about its authenticity, nobody really seemed to dispute the idea that the 'same' phenomenon could be reproduced anywhere. This is the main reason why those who upheld its authenticity could do so in terms close to those which can be used for any statement of experimental fact. This also explains why news that the miracle had not worked in some places had only minor significance. The reality of the observed phenomenon could not be denied merely by disputing the conditions under which it had been reproduced in one place or another. From this point of view, the miracle certainly did not correspond to the criteria of falsifiability established by Popper, which were held to by all those who wanted to demonstrate its impossibility by means of a unique but decisive counter-experiment. Sociologists of science, however, showed long ago that such Popperian criteria do not apply to extant scientific practices either.

Moreover, as they themselves quickly realised, scientists could not be content with demonstrating that the miracle had no credibility because it contradicted the laws of nature. Not only did the miracle obey them - according to the scientists' own statements - but, on this occasion, it was precisely the application of these laws that millions of people were in the process of discovering; at the same time and in their own way, they were also demonstrating the principles of replicability and universality. Thus, the paradox of this day is that it led to two collective discoveries, not just one. Many people discovered a miracle and, simultaneously, a certain set of applications of the physics of liquids, which were often unknown to them. Hence, in order to demonstrate that the miracle was no such thing, scientists could not simply show that the miracle was reducible to mere belief; they first had to extract the scientific discovery, in the most literal sense of the term, from the religious context in which it had been made.

The Dual Miracle

The secular interpretation of the miracle not only eliminated the possibility of divine intervention, but it also discredited the testimony of those feeble-minded enough to believe it. From this point of view, the miracle's witnesses were considered both as dupes of a conspiracy or manipulation, and as victims of their own ignorance and credulity. Those who finally saw reason had to acknowledge a view of 'things' wherein no distinction seemed to exist between sacred divine images and any other object.

Far from being limited to the explanation of the observed phenomenon, the scientists' criticism also involved a set of implicit presuppositions. The possibility of making a radical distinction between empirical reality and its religious or cultural significance depended on these presuppositions. All the 'rational' explanations of the miracle were based on separating the events of that day into two distinct yet complementary realities. On the one hand, there were the 'beliefs' and 'believers', whose study was entrusted to all sorts of social science experts, as well as psychologists and psychiatrists. On the other hand, the miracle was reduced to a

purely phenomenal reality, whose true 'nature' scientists alone could legitimately explain.

In a remarkable study, Stengers explores the possibility of accounting for the distinction between experimental propositions and other forms of knowledge, without resorting to a positivist conception of scientific practice.

It is the very meaning of the event that is created by the experimental invention; it is the invention of the power to endow things with the power to endow the experimenter with the power to speak in their name.... From this point of view, ... the singularity of the [experimental] apparatus is that it allows its inventor to withdraw, to let the process bear witness in his place. It is this process, staged by the apparatus, which silences other inventors, who would like to understand things differently. Thus the apparatus plays a double role: it makes the phenomenon 'speak' to 'silence' rivals.⁴⁴

In our case, however, as in other similar ones, the difficulty in interpretation derives from the fact that each 'rival' equally resorted to the strategy described by Stengers. It was not as if there were, on the one hand, people who would have openly appealed to their faith or transcendental authority to have their testimony endorsed, and on the other hand, people who would have disputed that testimony in the name of experimental science; both sides supported their arguments with the rhetoric of proof and invoked experimental authority.

Thus, when the scientists came on the scene, there were at least two ways, not just one, of staging the experimental apparatus so as to make the phenomenon 'speak' and 'silence' the rivals. Moreover, the respective validity of rival interpretations was not the only question; first of all, whether it was actually the same phenomenon at issue in both cases had to be known. The latter problem, however, could not be solved on any experimental basis. From this viewpoint, in effect, the question was less about making the phenomenon 'speak', as drowning out the 'rivals'' voices. That is what the two main networks taking an active part on this occasion through the media - the scientists and their spokesmen, and the militant Hindu ideologues and their sympathisers - used all their wits to do.

The Rhetorical Duel

The scientists and their spokesmen came out of their institutions to impose their interpretation of the phenomenon and thus publicly entered the debate. When they discounted any testimony which contradicted the scientific understanding of nature, the controversy was no longer about facts which all could judge on the basis of their own experience or personal judgement, for the interpretation of the miracle was rather presented as a competition between antagonistic and contradictory views

⁴⁴ Stengers, *L'invention des Sciences Modernes*, p. 98.

of the world. Yet, at the same time, a sharp discrepancy was created between how the event could be perceived by the majority of people and the controversy which it provoked in the media.

As we have seen, the miracle was received with enthusiasm or incredulity, curiosity or perplexity, and sometimes also with slight apprehension, because of its very popularity and how it might be manipulated. Undoubtedly, however, many people did not really know how to react and that is why many of them wanted to carry out the experiment for themselves. That this was so was reported by the media on the day itself. Journalists reported on the lively debates which took place wherever the miracle occurred, but even more importantly, on this occasion, they behaved in a curious way, as if they had been individually entrusted with checking whether the miracle really was one. The great majority were not content to describe the events they had witnessed; they indulged in a great deal of detail about what had 'really' become of the spoon of milk, which they had personally held out to the deity.

In complete contrast with the journalists' initiatives, the majority of newspapers, articles, editorials and expert commentaries about the miracle displayed a totally different state of mind.⁴⁵ Most representatives of the educated elite who expressed themselves on this occasion were clearly not in a mood to dilute their opinions or mince their words. So, in analyses describing popular reaction to the miracle, the most frequent terms were 'religious frenzy' and 'collective hysteria'; the miracle - with the word almost always placed within inverted commas - was frequently referred to as a 'gimmick' or a 'fraud'. In many commentaries too, well-chosen epithets were applied to those feeble-minded enough to believe in its authenticity. Thus, Vasant Sathe, a former Information Minister in the Indian government, declared that 'in the age of computers, it's an insult to human intelligence to say that the gods are drinking milk. If such is the case, what is the difference between human beings and cockroaches?'⁴⁶ And a petition signed by many scientists made it clear that educated people were particularly responsible for ensuring that 'due to illiteracy and lack of scientific culture, a form of primitive obscurantism doesn't take over the society at the dawn of the twenty-first century'.

Faced with such reactions, amply broadcast by the media, a minority of intellectuals riposted with identical vehemence. Besides the outraged but predictable reactions of militants and politicians linked with Hindu organisations, other voices made themselves heard. For example, T. N. Seshan, the former Indian Electoral Commissioner who was very popular with the media, drew attention to

⁴⁵ It is even more interesting to observe that *Asian Age*, the most cosmopolitan of the Indian dailies (and also the one aimed at an expatriate Indian readership), was perhaps the only newspaper of its kind to have chosen as its headline for the next day's edition a phrasing which appeared to contain no doubt about the authenticity of the miracle: 'Shiv Shakti dazzles India.' *Asian Age*, Delhi, 22 September 1995.

⁴⁶ *Asian Age*, Delhi, 22 September 1995.

himself on this occasion by denouncing the scientists as 'pseudo-scientists', and by declaring that it would be better to look for the surface tension of liquids in their brains than in the milk offered to the deities.⁴⁷ Three weeks after the event, the author of an article entitled 'Intellectual arrogance of the worst kind' - in speaking about the scientists who had expressed themselves - bemoaned the fact that there was no one in India 'to control the conduct of the self-appointed guard dogs of the society'. Their impunity was also insidiously contrasted with the treatment meted out to Salman Rushdie by Khomeini's Iran.⁴⁸

On one point, however, the interpretations of the ideologues who took a favourable stance towards the miracle came close to those of the scientists. Neither side was content to disavow the other; both very bluntly discounted all who did not share their point of view. On both sides, the one aspect never taken into account was the freedom granted to everybody not only to evaluate the event personally, but also, and more fundamentally, to arrive at their own conclusions and to decide on the measure of scientific rigour which would satisfy them in such a special case.

A Problem of Arbitration

In the present case, the testimonies of those who believed in the authenticity of the miracle were essentially being attacked in the name of a scientific interpretation of the phenomenon. But it is not only in these terms that the limitations inherent in any first-hand testimony can today be questioned. On no less decisive a level - and one which has a direct bearing on even more people - the increasingly important role ascribed to the media leads to the same result.

A spectacular example of this can be seen in the live broadcasting of sports events. This is particularly so for important football matches whose popular appeal can alone compare with that of the miracle. On such occasions, nowadays, people are less and less willing to admit that referees can base their judgement and decisions solely on their own view of the game, because their fallibility is too often shown up by the televised recording of the match.

Without anybody objecting or even noticing it, what then takes place is a radical reorganisation of the divide between truth and fiction, in terms of the relationship which can be established between immediate observation and later representation. Because the referee is still moving in the ordinary world of perception, his decisions may be suspected of being touched by fiction. By contrast, when it comes to assessing what 'really' happened, today's spectators place their trust in an even more singular representation of 'reality'. In this other 'world' of representations, it is possible not only to interrupt the flow of events and replay them, but also to modify at leisure the speed of play (thanks to slow motion) or even to replay the same event successively from many different angles. Owing to the ease with which television can provide such a mode of representation, any

⁴⁷ Seshan's comments at a conference in Bangalore, 24 September 1995.

⁴⁸ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 6 October 1995.

testimony which does not allow for the same possibilities risks being rapidly reduced to the status of simple 'belief'. Thus, in all cases in which referees are not given authority to resort equally to the cameras' verdict, their legitimacy nowadays rests on a paradox, because although millions of television viewers have access to a supposedly more accurate representation of the game, the outcome of the match still depends exclusively on the referee's decision, whatever its limitations.

Of course, it is not because a referee is more naive or ignorant about the rules of the game, or less attentive to the course of play, that he sees things in his own way. Nor is it because the television viewers know more about the facts or are more vigilant that they are better able to grasp the details of the action on the ground. Nor, obviously, is it because referees are more 'devoted' or 'superstitious' that they trust their own view of the game. Rather, it is simply because of the conventions ruling the sport, which can anyway be changed. Yet, in contrast, because we all agree to believe nowadays that the recorded, slow motion image better transcribes the 'truth' than any human testimony, by the same token we tend to cast doubt on the referee's ability to know what is really happening on the ground.

This example, apparently far removed from the topic of this article, was chosen in order to point out more clearly that it is unnecessary to assume marked individual or collective differences - and even less to resort to an explanation in terms of 'mentality' (scientific temperament, religiosity, cultural bias, lack of education, etc.) - to explain why people can have such divergent views about the same events.⁴⁹ Thus, in spite of their differences, it is interesting to compare games with the situation created by the miracle. In both cases, there are two distinct perspectives on reality which confront each other, and openly raised is the question of knowing which one should prevail: that of first-hand witnesses of the event, or that based on another form of its representation, which can lead to a redefinition of its meaning.

In the eyes of those who gave primacy to scientific explanation, the experiment carried out by people who believed in the miracle was a mere illusory effect, which did not differ fundamentally from what might be attributed to a referee on the ground. By contrast, for those who think that people's experience should be accorded priority in matters religious, it was not difficult to emphasise that they were the only ones whose testimony should be taken into account, whereas the scientists' reconstruction was deemed mere artifice. One can assimilate first-hand testimonies with beliefs or illusions and grant scientists alone the legitimate ability to explain natural phenomena. But this leads to a paradox if the majority of people do not accept the discounting of first-hand testimony, and the resultant redrawing of the boundary between truth and fiction, so that they continue to give precedence to collective experience, instead of acknowledging the priority of science. Then, beliefs can be reinforced still further, as the only ones which are in accordance with

⁴⁹ For an overview of this topic, see G.E.R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities*, Cambridge, 1990.

immediate experience and are potentially available to everyone. That is what happened in the case of this miracle.

Physics and Metaphysics!

In an enquiry conducted in the weeks after the miracle among 500 people in Bombay, responses were almost equally divided between those who said that they were convinced of its authenticity and those who accepted its scientific interpretation.⁵⁰ But above all - if this enquiry is to be credited - it was not because people knew about the scientific explanation of the miracle that they were a lot more doubtful than others about its authenticity. Nor, by contrast, was it because people were more religious, or because they did not know about the scientific explanation, that they were more easily convinced by the miracle. Rather, the fact of believing in the miracle and personal experience of it seem to have been mutually reinforcing dispositions.

It is certainly hard to assess the precise validity of such conclusions, although they seem to resonate with other evidence. In the first place, there is the fact that in urban areas, where people are relatively more educated, the miracle was able to attract a genuine audience. This was not really surprising, if we bear in mind that the majority of those using the means of communication which broadcast the news, as well as the largest number of voters supporting the Hindu parties, are also found in the same circles.⁵¹ The findings of the enquiry underline yet further the weakness of analyses and commentaries which too narrowly linked reactions to the miracle with people's social and cultural attributes. Above all, they lead us to emphasise how many people today - especially in urban areas - combine, in their daily lives in India, attitudes and opinions testifying to their religious devotion, as well as an open pragmatism and rationalism. Not that there is the slightest reason to consider such attitudes as contradictory. Yet, what is most remarkable is how the majority of the media presented the events of that day in terms of a contradiction between scientific knowledge and religious belief. I, however, have tried to show that exactly the opposite logic probably best accounts for the impact of such an event.

⁵⁰ Survey carried out by students of the Department of Psychology at the University of Bombay, *The Times of India*, Delhi, 27 October 1995. A more important and systematic survey was also carried out at that time by the National Institute of Science, Technology and Development Studies (NISTADS), New Delhi. It would be particularly interesting to know the results, but unfortunately they have still not been analysed. It is thanks to the researchers at NISTADS, especially Gauhar Raza, that I was able to have access to the complete dossier of press cuttings devoted to this event. Thanks are also due here to Emma Tarlo, who kindly collected cuttings on the topic from the British press for me.

⁵¹ In a survey carried out by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi, in May 1996 throughout the country, 23.6 per cent of people questioned had voted for the BJP (the most important Hindu party), although this proportion rose to 32 per cent in urban areas and to 36 per cent among the most educated strata ('graduates'). *India Today*, 31 May 1996, p. 48.

Hence, rather than choosing 'Physics or metaphysics?' as the title of its issue devoted to the miracle, the magazine *India Today* should perhaps have replaced it by 'Physics and metaphysics!'⁵² During the course of one day, for so many people, it was as if science and religion were not necessarily more contradictory 'in fact' than they were in their lives or minds. This, it seems to me, was the real issue in the event and, above all, the reason for its popularity.

The Triple Alliance

Exponents of scientific rationality in India have become progressively convinced that to get their message across efficiently, the best way of reaching a popular audience is by borrowing from traditional media such as folklore, drama, puppets and posters, and by using the most local idioms. It was therefore rather ironic that the most modern means of communication - largely neglected by the supporters of scientific rationality - were, by contrast, massively used to propagate the most spectacular of superstitions in scientific eyes. What is more, the conditions for reproducing the miracle were so simple that they could be implemented and understood immediately by anyone, irrespective of social or cultural background.

This was no accident. It is recognised today that Hinduism - as a collection of ritual practices and beliefs - was made into a 'religion' (in the Western sense of the term) relatively recently, with effects that began to be felt from the nineteenth century.⁵³ In this respect, it is worth noting the central importance of the successive introduction into India of new means of communication, which were then put at the service of Hinduism. This was first the case with printing, which played a leading role when it became clear among educated circles in India that it was possible to redefine the fundamentals of Hinduism on the basis of a corpus of texts derived from the most ancient Vedic and Brahmanic heritage. In the same period, perhaps a still more important development - though less studied - was the progressive standardisation of the major Hindu deities' representations, which was promoted by the cheap marketing of religious images, thanks to lithography. Their impact deeply influenced religious iconography throughout the country.

This process has never ceased and has even been dramatically accelerated owing to the great popularity of religiously-inspired films and serials, first in the cinema and then on television, and more recently on video cassettes. It has been the deities' mythology, as well as their images, which have been partially standardised by this process. In the modern history of Hinduism, the years 1987 and 1988 will stand out for the extraordinary success of the weekly televised serial devoted to the *Ramayana*, the most popular epic in the whole of India.⁵⁴ Even

⁵² *India Today*, 15 October 1995, pp. 86-91.

⁵³ See Gilles Tarabout and Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Les Transformations de L'Hindouisme' in C. Jaffrelot, ed., *L'Inde Contemporaine*, Paris, 1996, ch. 20.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*; see also Denis Vidal, 'Les Arts de L'image dans l'Inde Contemporain', in C. Jaffrelot, ed., *L'Inde Contemporaine*, Paris, 1996, ch. 23.

today, temple priests have emphasised to me the profound influence that it had on devotees' current knowledge about religion and mythology.

Until now, modern methods of communication have been used as devices to update and broadcast new representations of Hinduism. With the miracle, however, one more step was taken, and the possibilities offered by the media were exploited in a novel way to bring such representations into existence. By playing with the boundary between science and religion, over and above its possible political implications, it appears to me that a new form of 'religious ecology' thereby found an original and particularly spectacular means of expression. During one entire day, it seemed possible that communication between humans and deities was - in everyone's eyes - predisposed to recover the central place that it had always had in the array of rituals, cults and beliefs characteristic of Hinduism.⁵⁵

In studying the controversy provoked by the miracle, we cannot fail to notice that the arguments used, by one side or the other, to confirm or deny its authenticity often seemed to come from a bygone era. Yet, the commentators who bemoaned an event that was archaic in their eyes should, on the contrary, have been reassured. I do not know whether we should be happy about it, but Hinduism has once again demonstrated - if proof be needed - the modernity that has always characterised it. It has done so by linking the religion in new ways with several poorly-known principles of physics, as well as with the most modern means of communication, and by appealing to the testimony of everyone to draw conclusions from an experiment and experience which brought into question the beliefs of a community scattered all over the world.

During the last two decades, we have seen in India, as well as in other parts of the world, new modes of convergence between religion and politics. Most analyses devoted to this phenomenon stress how, in such contexts, political parties or different pressure groups attempt to manipulate or exploit people's beliefs. Attempts of this sort should not be underestimated, as the example under discussion shows. We should note, however, that if such events are considered in the long term, the argument can also be inverted. Detectable too, in our own times, is the effect of an instrumentalisation, which is not only about religion serving politics, but also about attempts to redefine politics within the framework of new religious forms. I have tried to show, however, that the issue raised by the miracle described here pertains not only to the boundary between religion and politics, but also to the no less decisive boundary that is required if we are to sustain confidence in the distinction between 'knowledge' and 'belief', when that distinction is established through terms increasingly common to religion, science and technology.

⁵⁵ On the central role of the interaction between human beings and deities in Hinduism, see C.J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame: Popular Hinduism and Society in India*, Princeton, 1992.

Note

This article is a translation by Véronique Bénéï and Christopher Fuller of Vidal's own abridged version of 'Empirisme et Croyance dans L'hindouisme Contemporain: Quand les Dieux Boivent du Lait!', published in *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, No. 4, July-August 1997, pp. 881-915. The first version of the article was presented at a panel on 'Analysis of ritual action', organised by Assayag and Fuller, at the 14th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies in Copenhagen in August 1996.