

The Contested Benevolence: A Study of the Dreaded Deity Shani Dev

Nupurnima Yadav

Abstract

The idea of god is fundamental in Hinduism, there are a number of gods/goddesses in the Hindu pantheon and most of the religious beliefs, rest on faith, in one god or the other. In Hinduism, one can hardly make sense of or understand the human experience of suffering and evil without reference to gods and deities. This paper intends to grapple with the concept of the interplay of faith and fear in venerating deities among Hindus. How fear of a particular deity regulates our faith and behavior towards them. The central theme focuses on the deity Shanidev, and his location in the context of Hindu religious beliefs and practices. There is an absence of sociological and anthropological inquiry around Shani and his social influence over individuals. The paper intends to investigate the practices around Shani through myths, individual experiences, and case study of local Shani shrines in the city of Gurugram, Haryana, and popular Kokilavan Dham in Uttar Pradesh in North India.

Keywords:

Introduction

In Hinduism, one can hardly make sense of, or understand the concept of god and the deities, without the reference to the human experience of suffering and evil. As a matter of fact, the gods themselves are ambivalent and because of this, it is difficult to understand how far they themselves embody evil and play the part of evil. There is simply no clear way to grasp the extent of their evil, in popular religious writings the gods have the same ambivalent character as the demons, a theme repeated in much of the art that decorates temple walls. They can be good and bad, harmless and evil. A unique characteristic that distinguishes the gods from humans and demons is their power, rather than their benevolence. Also, the reality of the god is experienced both as one and multiple. When one, therefore, tries to locate the role of evil and suffering in this reality, the question must also immediately address the issue of god, goddess, deities, demons, and spirits, for all regions of human life are seen as both protected and threatened by all of these.

NUPURNIMA YADAV, Research Scholar, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Email: nupurnima.yadav@gmail.com