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### *Darshan*

The **concept** of *darshan* – which is usually translated by words like ‘vision’ or ‘gaze’ - has come to occupy a central place in studies of the visual culture of India. Its status is attested by the importance it is given in the work of scholars like Diana Eck,<sup>1</sup> and Lawrence Babb<sup>2</sup> whose works deal with aspects of Indian culture and society where *darshan* is used by the people themselves; that is mostly, in religious contexts.

The importance of the concept of *darshan* is also shown in its use nowadays by scholars of the visual culture of India, where the word is not used in everyday speech. This is particularly the case in mass-media and popular culture studies; *darshan* is often used in this context to explain cultural differences in the way people may use photographs and popular prints or look at cinema in India. (Christiane Brosius,<sup>3</sup> Ravi Vasudevan,<sup>4</sup> Madhavan Prasad,<sup>5</sup> Geeta Kapur,<sup>6</sup>, and Chris Pinney<sup>7</sup> among others.)

More generally, there has been a marked tendency to give new currency to this notion by using it as some sort of paradigm which could be considered specific of an Indian or a Hindu manner of seeing. This is true not only in works directly related to Indian culture but also in other works. One may find an example of it in Alfred Gell last book about the anthropology of art;<sup>8</sup> but one could refer as well to some recent

works in art history where *darshan* is used as a paradigm for contrasting Indian manners of seeing with other Western or non-Western ones.<sup>9</sup> Finally, one has only to browse the Internet to realise the huge popularity, and also the often rather eccentric use of this term.

### **THE COMMON USE OF THE NOTION OF *DARSHAN* IN INDIA**

When Hindus go to a temple, a common manner of describing what they do is to say that they go there to take *darshan* of the divinity, that is, basically, to pay one's respect to the temple's divinities by having a quick sight of them. Such practice is obviously common in other religions; but what distinguishes the Hindu case from the Christian or the Muslim, for example, is the fact that such a gesture constitutes also quite often the only reason for Hindu people to go regularly into temples.

Most people, take the *darshan* of divinities not only by visiting local temples but also by travelling to places which play a central role in the sacred geography of Hinduism: sacred cities like Varanasi, rivers like the Ganga, mountain peaks often associated with Shiva or wider areas associated with a particular divinity such as the region of Braj in North India, which is traditionally associated with Krishna.

The crucial importance of *darshan* in Hinduism is therefore linked to the role it plays as an incentive for millions of people to travel every year to religious fairs and processions, famous temples and other places of pilgrimage. The importance of pilgrimages in the religious life of the Hindus may be compared to the time of their peak popularity in medieval Europe. In many of these cases, the concept of *darshan* is not always associated exclusively with seeing the image of a divinity but also includes

a more diffuse way of interacting with it; this is the case, for example, when *darshan* is associated with a sacred place as a whole.

*Darshan* is not only used, however, with reference to divinities and to sacred places. Most Hindus also take *darshan* of holy people, like *sants* and *sadhus*. As in the case of pilgrimages, the importance given to the *darshan* of these people has increased in recent times along with the importance of the role played by all sorts of sects and gurus in contemporary Hinduism. *Darshan* often constitutes the most important dimension of the relationship between a guru and his disciples as well as being a central feature of the life and organisation of ashrams and of Hindu sects.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to notice that the concept of *darshan* is not used only in religious contexts but also with reference to people who incarnate different forms of secular power, such as politicians or famous film actors. There is no doubt, for example, that people sought the *darshan* of Gandhi, and of Nehru and the other Prime Ministers of India, just as they may have sought the *darshan* of kings. Even today any petty official or politician in India may still often expect, at the local level, a sort of reception and interaction with people that is reminiscent of *darshan*. One may also add here that this broad use of the concept is made easier because of the way in which different forms of social power and religious blend into each other. There is no lack in India, of film stars who become politicians, nor of politicians - even after the abolition of kingship - who try to elevate their status beyond the purely secular.

## **THE HISTORY OF *DARSHAN* IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES**

While the preceding examples seem more than enough to justify the interest of students of Indian culture in the concept of *darshan*, it seems odd that it did not attract their attention until relatively recently.

*Darshan* is an ancient Sanskrit word which has been used commonly in India for a long time. But in spite of this, one does not find – as far as I know – references to such a notion before the 1980s, either in textual or anthropological studies ; This is important because it means that the history of this concept in South Asian Studies is quite different from many others which have been slowly elaborated during the colonial period before being recycled by Indianists and anthropologists more recently. It seems, indeed, that *darshan* took a prominent role as a category in the social sciences only after being the object of a short but synthetic and eminently readable monograph in 1979 by the well known historian of religions and Sanskritist, Diana Eck, and of a detailed and empirically well-grounded analysis by Lawrence Babb, an eminent anthropologist specialising in recent forms of Hinduism.<sup>11</sup>

What has really triggered the interest in *darshan* is that it has been presented not only in the context of a particular set of religious practices but also has been interpreted as the best possible way in which one should reconsider the way vision was conceived by Hindus. And at a time where every conscientious scholar is eager to escape the slightest accusation of ethnocentrism, an indigenous concept such as *darshan* as an alternative way of conceiving vision, has an irresistible appeal for many.

### **Seeing and touching**

According to Diana Eck and Lawrence Babb, the importance attributed to the fact of seeing and of being seen on the occasion of *darshan* is also linked to a conception of vision that associates in the most intimate manner the sense of sight and the sense of touch. Quoting Stella Kramrisch,<sup>12</sup> JanGonda<sup>13</sup> and others, Diana Eck multiplies, for example, the references in order to show how, from the Vedic times

until today, the fact of looking at one other seems to have been associated with some sort of tactile contact. Lawrence Babb goes further, on the basis of his fieldwork among the Brahma Kumari - by identifying the fact of looking at a god or at the guru for *darshan* not only as a means of touching, but also as a metaphorical way of 'drinking' his power. The proximity of seeing and touching is then used to explain as well, not only the deep intimacy which may be established between a devotee and a god, a disciple and his guru, in the context of *darshan*, but also the risks which are the automatic counterpart of such intimacy.

The relation between beings of such different status as the ones who come into contact on the occasion of *darshan* should be normally much more distant. The risk is not only that the superior in the relationship may be polluted by the inferior ; it is also possible that the inferior one may be hurt or destroyed by close proximity to personages of much higher status than himself.

This also explains why the ritual of *darshan* is so strongly associated with the idea of benevolence emanating from the superior being in the relation (the gods, guru or king); and also with a symmetric display of humility for the inferior one in the relation. Both attitudes are necessary in order to preserve the possibility of a harmless interaction between persons of such different status.

### **Vision and knowledge**

*Darshan* also links the fact of seeing to the fact of knowing. On one level, which does not concern us directly here, the term *darshan* is an important philosophical category, which characterises a 'philosophical' perspective or point of view and by extension is more or less equivalent to a philosophical 'school of thought'. But because of the yogic tradition, it is commonly held in Indian culture that fundamental

knowledge can be acquired not only through the intermediary of texts but also by the practice of meditation; and so one may find in this context, a direct link between the fact of seeing and the fact of knowing.

This is clearly demonstrated by Lawrence Babb on the basis of his studies among the Brahma Kumaris. One of the main practices of meditation in this sect consists of looking straight into the eyes of one's guru in order to see oneself as the guru sees one; but also more generally, to see the world as the guru sees it. The idea behind the prominent role given to *darshan* by this sect is that if you really manage to absorb yourself in the eyes of your guru, you will accede through it, not only to a sight of the supreme being but also to look at the world in the same way that the supreme being looks at it.

One could elaborate the different characteristics and implications which have been attributed to the notion of *darshan* by Diana Eck, Lawrence Babb and more recently by Chris Pinney, Sophie Hawkins and others who have refined our understanding of this concept in religious and in more secular contexts, both from a textual perspective and from an anthropological one.<sup>14</sup> The main point that I wish to convey here, however, is the fact that the success of the notion in the social sciences had been, in fact, a recent affair, largely based on the works of two scholars at the end of the 1970s and that the success of this concept is certainly linked to the claim that *darshan* is not only representative of a Hindu manner of seeing, but also of a specific one [in a comparative perspective](#). And now I qualify these two major axioms which are generally taken for granted when reference is made to the concept of *darshan*.

#### *DARSHAN* : A REAPPRAISAL

### **A comparative perspective**

Let us begin by examining the idea that one could use the concept of *darshan* in order to specify what could be considered to be 'a Hindu manner way of seeing'. The first point to be noted is that none of the characteristics used to specify the notion of *darshan* above may be considered 'unique' to Hindu culture, either from a historical or an anthropological perspective.

All commentators on *darshan* repeat that "vision is active and motivated and that it causes subject and object to have direct physical contact". There is no doubt that such a concept [?] should be considered, in fact, from a comparative point of view, as the most common way of conceiving the mechanism of vision, not only anthropologically but also historically and sociologically. This concept is known by all the historians of sciences as the theory of extramission and, as a matter of fact, it is the definition of extramission – and not the definition of *darshan* - that I have just quoted. Such a concept has been dominant in the Arabic world at least until the eleventh century and in the West until the Quattrocento and despite scientific explanation which insists on the, exact opposite, that is on the fact that the eye functions as a pure receptor, it has remained, according to sociological studies of science, the most common concept about the mechanism of vision even today in the United States.

Similarly, it is not exactly original to attribute the power of sight to an image representing a divinity; and it would be probably difficult to find a culture where a straight visual interaction between people of different status or condition has not been considered potentially disturbing - if not dangerous - for those involved., In other words, what any comparative perspective shows is that, even if one may be effectively tempted to consider the institution of *darshan* as representative of a

'Hindu manner of seeing', it is difficult to accept the claim however that such a conception of vision could be seen as 'unique' or 'singular'.

### **A Hindu manner of seeing?**

But even if one does not insist on the singularity of the concept of vision that is generally associated with *darshan*, the only idea that could exist something like a 'Hindu manner of seeing' remains problematic. There are basically two manners of associating the interpretation of *darshan* with a 'Hindu manner of seeing'. One is that it is done, in the manner of Diana Eck, by collapsing in the same analysis a whole set arguments drawn from domains as diverse as the Vedic texts or the Hindi films. This is only possible when it is assumed that all these examples can be considered as equally representative of a specific manner of seeing, more or less associated with Hinduism. Another is that it is done in a more anthropological perspective by scholars who assume that the particular context they have been using for studying the notion of *darshan* could be considered more generally representative of what is happening in 'the Hindu world'

Whatever the exact case, both strategies of interpretation clearly go against the grain of the trend of the last twenty years in anthropology. One may even be slightly surprised to find the expression of such an interest in what is explicitly defined a 'Hindu manner of seeing' when one knows that more or less exactly during the same period the main epistemological trend has been the opposite, to get rid of any sort of essentialist interpretation which may have been inherited from the past.

Moreover, perhaps there is no other domain where any attempt to generalise on the basis of a culture as a whole is more risky than in the domain of visual culture. One has only to consider from this point of view, not only the audacity but also the

methodological prudence of great art historian such as Michael Baxandall when he tries to demonstrate the existence of a common way of seeing among a well-defined circle of persons in Florence of the Quattrocento or in the Paris of the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> If one takes into account more generally the vast literature dedicated to the study of different concepts of vision all over the world, the difficulty of any sort of any generalisation in this domain is clear.<sup>16</sup>

To come back to a previous example, it is striking to note, from a sociological point of view, , today in the USA, there is a striking difference in the way in which scientifically aware persons understand vision and how the majority of people understand it in a more intuitive manner. Similarly if one limits himself to more informed circles, one cannot avoid noticing the changes which have taken place at different times and in different places about the conception of vision within different cultures; and it is equally striking to note the importance of intellectual interactions in this domain beyond any established society or culture [?]. To give a well-known example,, one cannot understand the medieval concepts of vision in the Islamic world without referring to the inheritance of classical Greece; but one cannot either understand the change in concepts of the principles of vision in modern Europe without referring to the Islamic inheritance.

Returning to the Hindu case, if one takes into account, on the one hand, the social and cultural diversity of India itself and on the other hand, the interaction between India , the West and the Islamic world, it is not clear why it would be plausible to assume the existence of a 'Hindu manner of seeing' that is more uniform and impervious to all cultural influences than a Muslim or a Western one. his, of course, does not make it less interesting to study the notion of *darshan* and to

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acknowledge its importance in specific contexts ; but one should be aware, as well, of the risks of overusing it in order to define an 'Hindu' or an 'indian way of seeing'

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<sup>1</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, Chambersburg, 1981.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Babb, *A Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism*, *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37, 1981, pp. 387-401

<sup>3</sup> Christiane Brosius, 'Hindutva intervisuality: Videos and the politics of representation' in Ramaswami, Sumati, ed., *Beyond appearances ? Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, New-Delhi, 2003, pp.265-297.

<sup>4</sup> Ravi Vasudevan, 'Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture in *Third Text* (34): Spring 1996, pp. 59-77

<sup>5</sup> M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Reconstruction*, Delhi, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Geeta Kapur. 'Revelation and Doubt: Sant Tukaram and Devi' in Tejaswini Niranjana, P. Sudhir, and Vivek Dhareshwar, eds. *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, Calcutta, 1993, pp. 233-264

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, Chicago, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency : an anthropological theory*, Oxford, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> R.S. Nelson (ed.), *Visuality before and beyond Renaissance*, Cambridge, 2000; Plate, S. Brent (ed.) *A cross-cultural reader in Religion, Art and Visual cultures*, New-York, , 2002.

<sup>10</sup> See, for exemple, L . DuPertuis, 'How people recognize charisma : the case of darshan in Radhasoami and Divine Light Mission » in *Sociological Analysis*, 1986, pp .111-124 ; Sophie Hawkins, 'Bordering realism. The aesthetics of Sai Baba's mediated universe' in Christiane Brosius and Melissa Butcher (eds) *Image Journeys : Audio-visual Media and Cultural Change in India*, New-Delhi, 1999, pp.139-163.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence A. Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition*, Berkeley, 1986.

<sup>12</sup> Kramrisch, Stella, *The Hindu Temple*, Calcutta, 1946.

<sup>13</sup> J. Gonda *Eye and Gaze in the Veda*, Amsterdam,1969.

<sup>14</sup> see, for example, André Padoux, ed. *L'image divine, Culte et méditation dans l'hindouisme*, Paris, éd. du CNRS, 1990, Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods, The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*, London, 2004.

<sup>15</sup>Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century, Italy : A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford, , 1972 ; Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention : On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven, 1985.