




Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī and Svāmī Karapātrī: Two Competing Discourses on Icon Worship in 19th- and 20th-Century India

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Abstract: *Mūrti pūjā*, or icon worship, is a widespread ritual practice in Hindu traditions. This article examines the intellectual debate on icon worship between the Ārya Samāja and Sanātānists emerging in 19th- and 20th-century India. Svāmī Dayānanda, the founder of the Ārya Samāja, believed that the Vedas – the only source of infallible truth – assert the existence of a single, formless God. Accordingly, he regarded icon worship as a “ridiculous” practice and its popularity as a sign of the decay of Hindu society. Svāmī Karapātrī, an influential 20th-century Indian scholar, disagreed with

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In this article, all the translations are mine unless otherwise stated. I considered the English translations of the *Ṛgvedādibhāṣyabhūmikā* and of the *Satyārtha Prakāśa*, and checked them with the original. This also allowed me to look at how Svāmī Dayānanda’s works were later presented to a non-Sanskrit and non-Hindi speaking public. This was fruitful especially in the case of the *Ṛgvedādibhāṣyabhūmikā*, where the English translation seems to slightly adjust some of Svāmī Dayānanda’s statements (see n. 24 below). I decided not to translate the Vedic mantras under scrutiny, as they come in the middle of a debate on their exegesis. I chose to adopt the translations of Kashyap and Whitney, so as not to fall under the exegetical influence of either Svāmī Dayānanda or Svāmī Karapātrī.

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Svāmī Dayānanda’s exegesis, and thus wrote the *Vedārtha Pārijāta* (“The Night Jasmine of Vedic Meanings”), where he comments on and confutes the philosophical positions of the Ārya Samāja established in Dayānanda’s *Ṛgvedādibhāṣyabhūmikā* (“Introduction to the Commentary on the *Ṛg Veda*, etc.”). In this article, after introducing the characters of Svāmī Dayānanda and Svāmī Karapātrī, there will follow an analysis of an excerpt from the *Vedārtha Pārijāta*, where Svāmī Karapātrī examines and discredits elements of Svāmī Dayānanda’s philosophical discourse on *mūrti pūjā*. This study contributes to contemporary scholarship on the colonial and post-colonial conflict between the Ārya Samāja and traditionalist groups.

Keywords: religious debate, Vedic exegesis, iconoclasm, Neo-Hinduism, traditionalism

1. Introduction

This article presents a case study of the long-standing debate between the Ārya Samāja and Sanātana Dharma² movements that originated in 19th-century colonial India. Already in the final decades of the 19th century, as a result of the Ārya Samāja reformist positions, traditionalist Hindu forces started organizing themselves into assemblies and associations, which were based on a plurality of regional caste-*sampradāya* nexuses, with the precise aim of defending their “orthodoxy” (Zavos 2001). The Ārya Samāja challenged the existence of these nexuses, questioning both the legitimacy of the caste system as a birth-based structure as well as the authoritativeness of epic and devotional (or *bhakti*) literature lying at the core of the *sampradāya* systems. In addition, one of the fundamental objectives of the Ārya Samāja campaign was the abolishment of *mūrti pūjā*, or icon worship, condemning the popularity of this practice as the sign of a decaying society.

Below is a presentation of some aspects of the intellectual debate revolving around icon worship as discussed by the traditionalist Svāmī Karapātrī, a highly influential figure in 20th-century India. Before turning to the debate on icon worship, an introduction to the life, ideologi-

2 Sanātana Dharma is usually translated as “the eternal order”. For further details, see Tirtha (2016). For the historical implications of the usage of this term, see Halbfass (1990: 334–348).

cal orientations and programs of both Svāmī Dayānanda and Svāmī Karapātrī shall be presented.

Svāmī Karapātrī is the author of the *Vedārtha Pārijāta*, a treatise mainly dedicated to confuting Svāmī Dayānanda's positions as they are expressed in his *Ṛgvedādibhāṣyabhūmikā*. Svāmī Karapātrī analyzes the philosophical justifications underlying Svāmī Dayānanda's aversion towards icon worship – for the Ārya Samāja, there is only one God, who is formless and never assumes any physical form whatsoever. For Svāmī Dayānanda, the Vedas are the only infallible source of every truth; therefore, everything contained in the four Saṃhitās is unquestionably the supreme law. Based on this premise, Svāmī Dayānanda argues that within the Vedas there are no injunctions to practice icon worship, but rather an explicit prohibition against it. Svāmī Karapātrī engages with Svāmī Dayānanda's controversial exegesis of the authoritative texts in an attempt to confute his positions. This debate provides a prime example of the intellectual tensions between reformists and traditionalists, which continue even today.

Some of the issues which arose between Svāmī Dayānanda and Svāmī Karapātrī are also debated in modern scholarship, for instance, whether or not icon worship was a practice also performed in Vedic times. The majority of scholars agree that in the Vedas there is no reference to *mūrti pūjā* as it is practiced in temples nowadays.³ However, in the discourse between Svāmī Dayānanda and Svāmī Karapātrī, icon worship comes to signify simply the veneration of non-conscious entities, and the nuances implicit in this definition serve as the origin of the exegetical contrast between Svāmī Dayānanda and Svāmī Karapātrī. The present study does not intend to add data to the academic question regarding the presence of some form of *mūrti pūjā* in the Vedas. Instead, it intends to contribute to contemporary scholarship regarding the colonial and post-colonial era relationship and debates among the Ārya Samāja and traditionalist movements. In particular, this study has benefited from the works of John Nicol Farquhar, Wilhelm Halbfass, Kenneth Jones, Noel Salmond and John Zavos. This article also represents an attempt to broaden the academic understanding of the character of Svāmī Karapātrī in the context of 20th-century India; in this field, Gianni Pellegrini is a leading academic authority.

3 For more details on the matter, see Banerjea (2016, chapters 2 and 3).

2. Svāmī Dayānanda and Svāmī Karapātrī

Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī (1824–1883),⁴ widely known as having founded the cultural reformist movement Ārya Samāja (established in 1875), lived during the era of British domination of the subcontinent. He was born Mūla Śaṅkara in the town of Morvi located in the Kathiawar region of Gujarat. His father was Ambā Śaṅkara, a fervent devotee of Śiva, wealthy and eminent *brāhmaṇa*, landowner and money lender. Ambā Śaṅkara is portrayed as a rigid Śaiva *brāhmaṇa*, rigorous and inflexible, while Svāmī Dayānanda’s mother is depicted as a benevolent and sweet woman. Svāmī Dayānanda’s education was a traditional one; he was initiated with the sacred thread at the age of eight and, according to Lajpat Ray (1992), his early education was at the hands of his uncompromising father. Most hagiographies agree on the significant role that the inflexible Ambā Śaṅkara played in bringing about Svāmī Dayānanda’s uprising against the religious establishment.

According to the hagiographical accounts, one of Svāmī Dayānanda’s most important life events took place during the celebrations of Śivarātri. Following the common custom, Ambā Śaṅkara invited his son to keep the customary fast of Śivarātri and accompany him to the temple for the night celebrations, where devotees gathered around the icon of the god Śiva, spending the night making offerings and praying to the *śivaliṅga*. On this occasion, however, after many hours, all the devotees fell asleep, including Ambā Śaṅkara, and Svāmī Dayānanda was the only one who remained watchful. It was then, in the dead of the night, that he saw a mouse approaching the *śivaliṅga* and eating some of the food offerings. Svāmī Dayānanda was struck by this image: how could the almighty god Śiva let a little mouse approach him and steal his food? He could not believe that a piece of stone was the almighty god.

I feel it impossible to reconcile the idea of an Omnipotent, living God, with this idol, which allows the mice to run over its body, and thus suffers its image to be polluted without the slightest protest. (*SP*, Prasad 1981: 2)

4 The biographical details are drawn from the *Satyārtha Prakāśa* and Farquhar (1915), Salmond (2006) and Lajpat Rai (1967).

Svāmī Dayānanda woke his father up, asking him how that icon could be the almighty God. His father was riled by this question and said that the icon was just a symbol through which they could venerate Śiva. During the *kali yuga*, he said, men could not directly perceive Śiva and the worship of the *śivaliṅga* was the only way to please God. Svāmī Dayānanda was not satisfied with his father's answer and asked permission to go home. There, despite his father's admonition to keep fasting, his mother fed him abundantly; the following morning he was severely scolded by his father for his conduct. It is said that from this moment on, Svāmī Dayānanda lost faith in his father as well as the strict orthodoxy he represented. This episode has been put forward as the beginning of Svāmī Dayānanda's aversion towards *mūrti pūjā*.

None could have foreseen that Dayanand's father's piously intended insistence upon his son's earning religious merit at the tender age of fourteen by observing the fast of Shivaratri, was to result in such a tremendous change in the mind of Dayanand turning him into the most virulent and successful opponent of image-worship of his times. (Rai 1992: 9)

According to Farquhar (1998: 104), it is difficult to believe in the authenticity of this story. Namely, that a 14-year-old boy could so spontaneously and vehemently challenge the well-established practice of icon worship. He argues that Svāmī Dayānanda was probably under the influence of the Sthānakavāsīs, a group of Jains who, breaking with the main Śvetāmbara sect in the 15th century, had given up icon worship; Svāmī Dayānanda's birthplace was under the direct influence of this religious group. The group was quite prominent at the time – the political establishment of Morvi being closely connected with the Jain sect. For Farquhar, it is not surprising that the young Mūla Śaṅkara may have been exposed to the Sthānakavāsīs iconoclast positions, and eventually elaborated on his aversion towards icon worship.

In 1846, Svāmī Dayānanda left the family home and started wandering in search of a teacher. He was initiated into the monastic order of the Daśanāmīs, allegedly by a guru known as Paramānanda, who gave him the name Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī. At a later date, Svāmī Dayānanda lost faith in the teachings of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya, thus giving up the doctrine of identity between *brahman* and *ātman*. During his

wanderings, Svāmī Dayānanda not only came into contact with several Christian missionaries, but even engaged in many conversations with them (Farquhar 1998: 108). Around this time, probably influenced by his frequent meetings with the Christian missionaries, the founder of the Ārya Samāja came to believe in a personal god who is different from one's own self and also existent in the reality of the world, thus abandoning the Vedāntic notion that the world is an illusion of *māyā*.

In 1860, Svāmī Dayānanda finally met his master, Virajānanda, in Mathurā. Virajānanda taught him that all modern religious works were “worthless lies” (Farquhar 1998: 106) and that only the ancient treatises were truly authoritative and legitimate. It was Virajānanda who entrusted his disciple with the task to teach the Vedas, which “have long ceased to be taught in Bhāratvarsha” (Singh 1903: 77). In 1868, Svāmī Dayānanda started to promote his ideas publicly, engaging in public debates, publishing books and traveling from town to town delivering speeches. In 1872, he met the leader of the Brahma Samāja, Keśaba Chandra Sen; in 1874, he completed his *opus magnum*, the *Satyārtha Prakāśa* (*SP*) (“The Light of Truth”); and, in 1875, he founded the cultural reformist movement Ārya Samāja in Mumbai. Soon after, the headquarters of the movement moved to Lahore. Svāmī Dayānanda spent his last years working to expand his movement throughout North India. In 1883, he passed away at the age of 59.

Svāmī Dayānanda lived at a time of great distress in India. According to Halbfass, the British domination in India was not just a case of foreign domination, but rather “an encounter between tradition and modernity, i.e., an exposure to new forms of organization, to rationalization, technology, and a comprehensive objectification of the world” (Halbfass 1988: 217).

Paul Hacker identified the emergence of two opposing attitudes, which he called “Neo-Hinduism” and “surviving traditional Hinduism” (Hacker 1978). It is especially in 19th- and 20th-century India that these two attitudes manifest themselves into Neo-Hindu and traditionalist or Sanātana Dharma movements. These terms, however, do not imply homogeneous movements. Neo-Hindu groups, like Svāmī Dayānanda's Ārya Samāja and the Brahma Samāja, were not at all identical in terms of aims and programs. For instance, Svāmī Dayānanda strongly condemned Rammohan Roy for his xenophilia and how it influenced the

Brahmo Samāja social programs. Nonetheless, Neo-Hindu movements shared a tendency to reinterpret Hindu textual traditions in the light of Western influences.

Neo-Hinduism invokes the tradition, tries to return to it, and hopes to find in it the power and context for its response to the West. [...] More important than the fact that foreign elements have been added to the tradition is that basic concepts and principles of this tradition have been reinterpreted and provided with new meanings as a result of the encounter with the West. (Halbfass 1988: 220)

Similarly, traditionalist groups were far from being a united entity, yet they maintained “a certain unbroken continuity with the tradition” (Halbfass 1988: 220), particularly with the textual traditions as well as certain features of the establishment, including *mūrti pūjā*. In fact, while *mūrti pūjā* was accepted by most traditionalist movements, it was highly criticized by Neo-Hindu organizations like the Brahmo Samāja and Ārya Samāja.

While these categories are effective in framing the intellectual conflict which started in 19th-century India between the Ārya Samājīs and the Sanātana Dharmīs, Paul Hacker argues that these divisions were not mutually exclusive and that it was possible to find organizations as well as individuals who shared both Neo-Hindu and traditionalist characteristics.

The founder of the Ārya Samāja aimed to factually reinterpret Hindu religious traditions, and therefore commence a “vertical restructuring” (see Zavos 2001: 117) of the present Hindu establishment. Svāmī Dayānanda maintained the infallibility of the Vedas and that they are the source of every truth. In his opinion, Hindus had long forgotten the true meaning of the sacred hymns and, consequently, were living in a manner that did not correspond to Vedic principles. He believed that the Vedas portrayed a mythical past when Hindus, or – as he called them – the “Vedics”, were at the peak of their spiritual power and technological development. During this “golden era”, Hindus lived according to the true precepts of the Vedas, which made them capable of ruling the entire world. Svāmī Dayānanda’s goal was to retrieve the true precepts of the Vedas for his countrymen, thus restoring the Vedic “way of living”.

This would allow for a return to that ancient splendor, when Indians were not subjugated by a colonial power. Svāmī Dayānanda’s interpretation of the four Saṃhitās implied that the present religious and social establishment had to drastically change in order to realize this ambition. First, it was necessary to abolish the caste system as a birth-based structure and establish a merit-based caste system in its place. The annulment of the hereditary principle aimed to overcome people’s inertia, thus avoiding the economic and social consequences of a lazy and static society. Second, while Svāmī Dayānanda regarded the Vedas and a few other texts (such as the *Manusmṛti* and Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*) as authoritative, he despised epic and devotional literature as being unreliable and the mere product of a decaying society that believed in the existence of many gods. In the eyes of Svāmī Dayānanda, *mūrti pūjā* was a superstitious practice, and its popularity among the Hindus the sign of a perishing society. Svāmī Dayānanda vehemently opposed this custom, believing that devotion to one god or another was the greatest obstacle for a united Hindu society. Svāmī Dayānanda’s reformist program was abhorred by those traditionalists who wished to maintain an unaltered establishment. As a result, when the ideas of Svāmī Dayānanda started circulating throughout the subcontinent, traditionalist forces felt the urge to respond.

The Aryas [...] had achieved an increasingly separate identity from the orthodox and traditional world around them. Their defense of this new lifestyle and aggressive condemnation of the old created an institutionalized opposition. (Jones 1976: 108)

Opposition by the upholders of *Sanātana Dharma* manifested itself in the formation of associations (*sabhās*), the organization of public debates and lectures, as well as the publication of books and journals. For instance, already as a result of Svāmī Dayānanda’s arrival in Lahore in 1877, traditionalist forces established a Sanātana Dharma Sabhā to oppose the spread of the Ārya Samāja (Jordens 1978: 166). The Bhārata Dharma Mahā Maṇḍala was a prominent organization founded in 1887 by Paṇḍita Dina Dayāla Śarmā, with the aim of working in the defense of “orthodoxy”.⁵ Many of the debates between the Ārya Samājīs and the

5 According to Zavos (2001), the Hindu world lacks a united center that supervises an “orthodoxy”, like that of the Pope for the Christians. Instead, in India,

Sanātānists revolved around *mūrti pūjā*, the extent of the Hindu canon and the caste system. In particular, Paṇḍita Śarmā fought vehemently against the iconoclasm of the Ārya Samāja, teaching “the people to retain their idols and live in orthodox fashion” (Farquhar 1998: 316).⁶ In the late 1880s, the Sanātānists – despite not being a united front – began a prolific literary output directed towards the defense of their own orthodoxy. According to Jones, “the teaching, as well as the personality, of Swami Dayanand remained for Sanatanists a prime target of criticism” (Jones 1976: 111).

When Svāmī Karapātrī entered the debate (about 50 years after Svāmī Dayānanda’s activity), the ideological conflict between the Ārya Samājīs and Sanātana Dharmīs was still very much alive. Svāmī Hariharānanda Sarasvatī (1907–1982), also known as Svāmī Karapātrī, was born Haranārāyaṇa Ojhā in a *brāhmaṇa* family⁷ (about 25 years after Svāmī Dayānanda’s death) in the village of Bhatni (Pratapgarh district, Uttar Pradesh). He started studying Sanskrit at a very early age; he first attended the local elementary school and then continued studying with Paṇḍita Nāgeśa Miśra in the Karpuri village. It is said that Svāmī Karapātrī was forced into marriage and, after the many attempts to escape the union, reached a compromise with his father, giving his word that he would not leave home until he had fathered a child. When the 17-year-old became the father of a baby girl, he left home to Prayag Raj, where he met his guru, Svāmī Brahmānanda Sarasvatī, the future Śāṅkarācārya of the Jyotiṣapīṭha.

Svāmī Karapātrī then attended the Sāṅgveda, a prestigious school of Vedic studies in Narvar, where he studied Sanskrit grammar, Vedānta and other *darśanas* under the supervision of Svāmī Viśveśvarāśrama.

there are local institutions based on a nexus of caste and *saṃpradāya*, forming several regional “frameworks of orthodoxy”. I add that the four *maṭhas* of the Śāṅkarācāryas stand as macroregional centers of “orthodoxy”, which supposedly supervise the quarters of the subcontinent.

- 6 During this time, even though they were not connected with one another, several Sanātānist organizations emerged all over India with the aim of defending “orthodoxy” (see Farquhar 1998: 316).
- 7 The following biographical notions are drawn from the volume edited by G. Pellegrini (2009), particularly from Marchetto (2009), as well as fieldwork notes collected in 2020 in Varanasi.

Subsequently, he left for the mountainous regions of Uttarakhand, where he lived as an ascetic for three years. This is where he started being called by the name of Karapātrī, meaning “one who uses their hands (*kara*) as a bowl (*pātra*)” – as he used to collect alms directly in his closed hands, in the gesture of a bowl, and eat from them. In 1931, returning from his ascesis, Svāmī Karapātrī came back to Narvar, where he completed his study of the six *darśanas*. He then moved to Varanasi, where Svāmī Brahmānanda Sarasvatī initiated him into the *daṇḍa samnyāsa* and gave him the name of Svāmī Hariharānanda Sarasvatī; yet, he became mainly known by the name of Svāmī Karapātrī.

Svāmī Karapātrī was a highly influential character of 20th-century India. He was a religious and social leader – a freedom fighter, actively working against British rule in India and, later on, a strong supporter of an “Undivided India” (*akhaṇḍa bhārata*). It appears that one of Svāmī Karapātrī’s main life goals was that of defending the religious tradition from the innovations of and attacks by Neo-Hindu groups, right-wing associations and groups (e.g., the *Rāṣṭrīya Svayamsevaka Saṅgha* and the *Viśva Hindū Pariṣada*), Christian missionaries and Marxists. Precisely because of his propensity to “preserve” the present religious and social establishment and actively work in the name of conserving *Sanātana Dharma*, he was given the title of *dharmasamrāṭa* (the emperor of *dharma*) by the monastic community in Varanasi.

Between 1935 and 1940, Svāmī Karapātrī founded two magazines: the monthly *Sanmārga* and the weekly *Siddhānta*, which became fundamental tools for spreading his teachings. Svāmī Karapātrī would organize *śāstrārthas* (symposiums or debates) on religious topics and relevant issues of Indian society. On several occasions, he also invited Ārya Samājīs to discuss different topics, such as that of *mūrti pūjā*. In 1940, he founded the cultural association *Dharmasamgha*, which also aimed to combat the spread of its adversaries, including the Ārya Samāja. Svāmī Karapātrī established several branches of the *Dharma Śikṣā Maṇḍala*, a school designed after the *guruśiṣyaparamparā* model. In 1948, he founded the *Rāma Rājya Pariṣada*, a political party that even won a few seats in the *Loka Sabhā* as well as the *Vidhāna Sabhās* (regional assemblies) of North India. To disseminate his ideas, he traveled all over India; he engaged in the revitalization of Vedic sacrifices that had been forgotten, probably with the further aim to obstruct the spread of the Ārya Samāja’s *havan*, a special

type of offering made into fire.⁸ Svāmī Karapātrī was a prolific author of both religious and socio-political works. In 1982, Svāmī Karapātrī passed away in Varanasi at the age of 75.

3. *Vedārtha Pārijāta*: the intellectual arena of Svāmī Karapātrī

Svāmī Karapātrī wrote two major works refuting the positions of the Ārya Samāja: the *Vedasvarūpavimarśa* (“Considerations on the Nature of the Vedas”); and the *Vedārtha Pārijāta* (VP; “The Night Jasmine of Vedic Meanings”),⁹ the latter being the primary textual source of this article. The VP is a Sanskrit work of two volumes, whose main portions consist of a complete analysis of Dayānanda Sarasvatī’s *Ṛgvedādibhāṣya-bhūmikā* (RVBB; “Introduction to the Commentary to the Ṛg Veda, etc.”). The VP was published in 1979, edited by Paṭṭābhirāmaśāstrī Vidyāsāgara, Mārkaṇḍeya Brahmācārī and Mīmāṃsācārya Gajānanaśāstrī Musalagāṃvakara, with a Hindi commentary by Vrajavallabhadvivedī Darśanācārya and published by the Śrī Rāghākr̥ṣṇa Dhānukā Prakāśana Saṃsthāna in Kolkata. While I am not aware of any earlier publications of the VP, as a whole or as separate issues, since Svāmī Karapātrī was the founder of two journals (the *Siddhānta* and the *Sanmārga*, the mouthpieces of his religious and social visions), it would not be surprising to find fragments of the VP published in these magazines. The first publication of the RVBB is dated around 1876–1877, and it is likely that Svāmī Karapātrī already expressed his opinion on Svāmī Dayānanda’s work in his magazines, which represented a much faster and far-reaching tool than the VP, though not being as in-depth and exhaustive.¹⁰

The RVBB was not initially published in one single volume, but appeared in 16 separate issues. The first volume was published in 1876 by

8 The Ārya Samāja *havan* differs from the Vedic *yajña*. In the *havan*, the oblations poured into the fire are not offered to the gods, but they are only for the sake of purifying the air. The mantras pronounced along with the offerings are only for exercise.

9 For indications on the symbolism of night jasmine (*pārijāta*), see Pellegrini 2016.

10 Due to the limited availability of the entire collection of *Siddhānta* and *Sanmārga*, I have been unable to thoroughly research journal articles providing a critique of Svāmī Dayānanda’s understanding of icon worship.

the Lajras Press in Varanasi, while the last two issues were published in 1877 by the Nirṇaya Sāgara Press in Mumbai. The *RVBB* was meant to be an introduction to a commentary on the Vedas that Svāmī Dayānanda wanted to compose. Unfortunately, he died before he could complete this work; nonetheless, the *RVBB* stands as a precious testimony of Svāmī Dayānanda’s philosophy. The *VP* of Svāmī Karapātrī was also conceived of as an introduction to a commentary on the Vedas that he likely composed as a response to Svāmī Dayānanda. Sadly, he also passed away before completing his work.

It is significant that Svāmī Karapātrī, before starting his project to produce a commentary on the Vedas, decided to write an exhaustive introduction where his task was to confute, word by word, Svāmī Dayānanda’s introduction to the four Saṃhitās. In fact, in the *VP*, Svāmī Karapātrī analyzes the *RVBB* almost *verbatim*, so as to completely undermine the credibility of Svāmī Dayānanda’s reading of the Vedas. In order to accomplish his task, Svāmī Karapātrī made the highly traditional choice of utilizing the Mīmāṃsā *darśana* for his argumentations. As Halbfass argues, the Mīmāṃsā is “a system whose apologetic motivation is straightforward and which, as a whole, represents an attempt to develop a comprehensive explanation and defense of the Vedic dharma” (Halbfass 1991: 367). The choice to adopt the Mīmāṃsā school of thought for the analysis of Svāmī Dayānanda’s positions clearly reveals Svāmī Karapātrī’s intent to defend and preserve the Vedas from the exegesis by the Ārya Samāja. For the most part, the *VP* is built around the same structure as the *RVBB*. In particular, Svāmī Karapātrī adopts the chapter structure of the *RVBB* in order to specifically quote the content and accurately analyze it in an ordered manner. Accordingly, Svāmī Dayānanda’s chapters on “The Falsity of *Mūrti Pūjā* and *Nāma Smaraṇa*” (*mūrtipūjānāmasmaraṇayor mithyātvam*) and “The Falsity of the Worship of the Planets” (*grahapūjāyā mithyātvam*) are systematized in Svāmī Karapātrī’s “Consideration on *Mūrti Pūjā*” (*mūrtipūjāsamarthanam*).

In the *VP*, while commenting upon his opponent’s reflections, Svāmī Karapātrī always seems to reach one of the following three conclusions: (1) Svāmī Dayānanda’s statements are false because they clearly contradict the Vedas and their auxiliary texts; (2) Svāmī Dayānanda’s statements are false because they are self-contradictory; or (3) Svāmī Dayānanda’s interpretations are false because they resemble the reason-

ing of a child. Below is an example of how Svāmī Karapātrī comes to the conclusion that Svāmī Dayānanda's positions on *mūrti pūjā* cannot be taken into consideration because they are both against the śruti and self-contradictory.

4. The worship of the non-conscious (*acetana*): excerpts from the *Vedārtha Pārijāta*

Svāmī Dayānanda did not believe in the existence of many gods, but rather in a single godhead, whom he called Īśvara. For Svāmī Dayānanda, God is not to be worshipped by means of icons and images, but only spiritually, through prayers and singing. The study of the Vedas, good conduct and the performance of *havan* were also regarded as modes of worship. Svāmī Dayānanda's God is *nirguṇa* (i.e., devoid of the properties of matter, such as touch, smell, etc.) and also devoid of negative qualities, such as ignorance. At the same time, he is also *saguṇa* (i.e., endowed with positive qualities like knowledge and being almighty).¹¹ In the *SP*, Svāmī Dayānanda explains that God is always formless (*nirākara*):

Q: Is god corporeal or incorporeal?

A: Incorporeal; for had He been corporeal, He could not have been all-pervading, and absence of omnipresence in Him would have made the ascription of omniscience and other attributes inconsistent. For, a limited object has limited qualities, nature and action. Also, such a limited being cannot be free from heat and cold, hunger and thirst, disease, evil, mortification, separation, and other kinds of sufferings. These considerations lead us to the only conclusion that God is immaterial or formless. (*SP*, Prasad 1981: 211)

It appears that Svāmī Dayānanda's main argument against icon worship is that "God is always immaterial or formless"; consequently, the

11 This interpretation of *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* as the "absence of negative qualities" and the "presence of positive qualities" applied to a divine entity resembles that of Rāmānuja. It strongly differs from Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's explanation of *nirguṇa* and *saguṇa* as "devoid of qualities" and "endowed with qualities". This is another example of Svāmī Dayānanda's rejection of Ādi Śaṅkarācārya's doctrine (the same doctrine he was instructed in when he took renunciation).

reverence of *mūrti* is equivalent to the adoration of non-conscious objects (*acetana*), a practice that Svāmī Dayānanda condemns as superstitious. Here, Svāmī Karapātrī does not engage with the actual contents of Svāmī Dayānanda’s arguments, but rather confines himself to proving that Svāmī Dayānanda’s method of reasoning is factually wrong and self-contradictory.

We will now examine a few aspects of the discourse on *mūrti pūjā* as they are presented in the *RVBB*, and then commented upon in the *VP*. The discourse begins with the question of the presence or absence of injunctions to (*vidhi*) and prohibitions against (*niṣedha*)¹² icon worship within the Vedas. Svāmī Dayānanda argues that there are no Vedic injunctions to perform *mūrti pūjā*, but rather explicit prohibitions against it. Contrarily, Svāmī Karapātrī responds that there are no restrictions towards performing icon worship (referred as the worship of *pratimā*),¹³ but rather exhortations to it. Moreover, Svāmī Karapātrī intends to prove that Svāmī Dayānanda’s position is fundamentally self-contradictory, and that Svāmī Dayānanda himself inadvertently enjoins the worship of the non-conscious (*acetana*). In his *RVBB*, Svāmī Dayānanda introduces a section titled, “The Falsity of *Mūrti Pūjā* and *Nāma Smaraṇa*”,¹⁴ which reads, in part:

What is said in treatises as the Tantras, Purāṇas, etc., regarding *nāma smaraṇa* and icon worship, etc., is false, because there is no injunction (*vidhāna*) to these [practices] in the truthful treatises, like the Vedas, etc.¹⁵

12 The Vedas consist of five parts: injunction (*vidhi*), sacrificial formula (*mantra*), name (*nāmadheya*), prohibition (*niṣedha*) and explanatory passage (*arthavāda*). *Vidhi* is the most important as it enjoins the acts directly, while *niṣedha* are the prohibitory sentences turning people away from actions (see *AS*, the introduction by Gajendragadkar and Karmarkar (2016): xxvii–xxix).

13 According to Banerjea (2016: 36–57), since a relatively early date, the word *pratimā* referred to symbolic representations of divinities which were not associated with particular cults. Later, *pratimā* came to signify *arccā*, as the objects of regular worship (Banerjea 2016 [1941]: 39).

14 *mūrtipūjānāmasmaraṇayor mithyātvam* |.

15 *yac ca* – “*tantrapurāṇādigranthoktasya nāmasmaraṇasya mūrtipūjādīnām ca mithyātvam, vedādisatyagrānthe tasya vidhānābhāvāt* | (*VP*, p. 1616 and *RVBB*, p. 348).

Svāmī Karapātrī reports Svāmī Dayānanda's position only with the intention of contradicting it:

What is said here is vain, due to an improper understanding of the *śāstras*. This is because injunctions (*vidhāna*) to *mūrti pūjā* are seen in these and other Vedic statements: “Hey come! Stay in the stone. May your body be the stone”, [RV 2.13.4] “the desire of mentally speaking the name [of Viṣṇu]” [RV 1.156.3].¹⁶

While dismissing the argument that in the Vedas there are no injunctions to *mūrti pūjā* and *nāma smaraṇa* (the remembrance of the name of the gods) by simply quoting a few instances from the śruti, Svāmī Karapātrī focuses on the Vedic mantra used by Svāmī Dayānanda as proof of the prohibition against icon worship. Particularly, Svāmī Dayānanda takes the expression “*na tasya pratimā asti*” to be an interdiction against *mūrti pūjā*,¹⁷ thus ultimately understanding *pratimā* in its later sense of “object of worship”. In his *RVBB*, Svāmī Dayānanda quotes from the *Vājasaneyi Saṃhitā* of the *Śukla Yajurveda* (ŚYV 32.3) and subsequently comments upon it.

There is none to compare with him. His name itself is great glory, Hiraṇyagarbha. “May he not destroy us.” “No one other than thee.” (ŚYV 32.3). (Kashyap 2012: 229)

God is all perfect, unborn and formless. The muttering of his name is to obey his will. Which brings great glory (and enables us) to perform the righteous deed and to speak truth. He is the birthplace, i.e., source of all luminaries, the sun &c. Before him all men pray, “May He not harm us”. He never assumes a

16 *ity uktam, tad api tuccham, śāstrānabodhāt | “ehy aśmānam ātiṣṭha aśmā bhavatu te tanuḥ”* “[viṣṇor] nāmacidvivaktana” *ity ādivaidikavākyeṣu mūrtipūjādividhānadarśanāt* | (VP, p. 1616).

17 *tatra tu pratyuta niṣedho varīvartate | tad yathā – “na tasya pratimā asti yasya nāma madyaśaḥ | hiraṇyagarbha ity eṣa mā mā hiṃsīty eṣā yasmān na jāta ity eṣaḥ”* (yaj. 32.3) (RVBB, p. 348). The explanation of “*na tasya pratimā asti*” as a prohibitive statement against *mūrti pūjā* is perhaps one of Svāmī Dayānanda's strongest arguments. Even now, among the adepts of the Ārya Samāja, to quote this mantra is the fundamental argument for rejecting icon worship. In 2019, during a visit to the Pāṇini Kanyā Mahāvidyālaya in Varanasi, the young students of the school stated that they did not believe in *mūrti pūjā* since in the Vedas it is clearly stated that “*na tasya pratimā asti*”, i.e., there is no image of Him.

corporeal form because He is not born from any cause. He has no *pratimā*, i.e., representative, image, measure, weight, size or counterpart, because He is incomparable, figureless, unmeasurable, formless and all-pervading.¹⁸

After having made clear that Svāmī Dayānanda considers ŚYV 32.3 a direct prohibition against icon worship, Svāmī Karapātrī questions his rival’s consistency when, just a few lines after his explanation, Svāmī Dayānanda affirms that *pratimā* does not have the meaning of “icon”.

Question: In the Vedas, is there the word *pratimā*, or not?

Answer: There is.

Question: Then what is the reason for the prohibition [against *mūrti pūjā*]?

Answer: It is not that icons (*mūrti*) are meant by the term *pratimā*.

[Question:] What then?

[Answer:] The [word *pratimā*] is meant as having the meaning of “measure” (*parimāṇa*).¹⁹

Svāmī Karapātrī accuses Svāmī Dayānanda of being inconsistent when he is giving two different meanings to the word *pratimā*: that of *mūrti* when it comes to interpreting a prohibition against icon worship; and that of *parimāṇa* (or “measure”) in the other Vedic passages.

[However,] this [assertion that *pratimā* does not mean *mūrti*] is clearly against [Svāmī Dayānanda’s] own words. [Here, for Svāmī Dayānanda,] the understanding of *mūrti* from the word *pratimā* is not possible, yet *parimāṇa* is understood. Then, how is it not self-contradictory to understand “*mūrti*” from the word *pratimā* in this mantra: *na tasya pratimā asti?* (ŚYV 32.3).²⁰

18 Svāmī Dayānanda’s explanation of ŚYV 32.3 is not reported by Svāmī Karapātrī in the *VP*, but is clearly taken for granted. This translation is drawn from Parmanand’s translation of the *RVBB* (1981: 385).

19 *praśnaḥ – vedeṣu pratimāśabdo ’sti na vā? uttaram – asti | pra. – punaḥ kimartha niṣedhaḥ? u. – naiva pratimārthena mūrtayo grhyante | kiṃ tarhi? parimāṇārthā grhyante* | (*VP*, p. 1616 and *RVBB*, p. 349).

20 *iti svoktivistirodhasya spaṣṭam udiyamānatvāt | pratimāpādena mūrtigrahaṇam na sambhavati, parimāṇam tu bodhyata ity asyaivārthasyāsmād vākyāt pratīyamāna-*

Svāmī Karapātrī, therefore, concludes that “*na tasya pratimā asti*” cannot stand as a prohibition against icon worship.

Since there is no perception of statements prohibiting icon worship, the prohibition of icon worship is indeed not founded on authority.²¹

In fact, in order to reinforce his opinion that, in the Vedas, the word *pratimā* means *parimāṇa* or “measure”, Svāmī Dayānanda quotes and analyzes a mantra from the *Atharva Veda* (AV 3.10.3). Here, Svāmī Karapātrī points out, Svāmī Dayānanda is inadvertently prescribing some sort of *mūrti pūjā*.

Thou, O night, whom we worship as model (*pratimā*) of the year²² – do thou unite our long-lived progeny with abundance of wealth.²³ (AV 3.10.3, Whitney 1905: 100)

The intelligent one worships [the night] as the measure (*parimāṇa*), *yām pratimām*, of the full year, *saṃvatsara*. We also

tvāt | ato “na tasya pratimā asti” (vā. saṃ. 32.3) iti mantre pratimāśabdena mūrti-grahaṇam kurvānasya tasya katham na svoktivilrodhaḥ? (VP, p. 1616).

21 *mūrtipūjāniṣedhakavākyānupalambhāc ca mūrtipūjāniṣedho ‘prāmāṇika eva | (VP, p. 1616).*

22 The nights are the digits of the full year, representing Prajāpati. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BU) 1.5.14, we read: *sa eṣa saṃvatsaraḥ prajāpatiḥ ṣoḍaśakalaḥ, tasya rātraya eva pañcadaśa kalāḥ, dhruvaivāsya ṣoḍaśi kalā; sa rātribhir evā ca pūryate ‘pa ca kṣīyate; so ‘māvāsyaṃ rātrim etayā ṣoḍasyā kalayā sarvam idaṃ prānabhṛd anupraviśya tataḥ prātar jāyate; tasmād etaṃ rātrim prānabhṛtaḥ prānaṃ na vicchindyāt, api kṛkalāsasya, etasyā eva devatāyā apacityai.* “This Prajāpati (Hiraṇyagarbha) has 16 digits and is represented by the year. The nights (and days) are his fifteen digits, and the constant one is his sixteenth digit. He (as the moon) is filled as well as wasted by the nights (and days). Through this sixteenth digit he permeates all these living beings on the new-moon night and rises the next morning. Therefore, on this night one should not take the life of living beings, not even of a chameleon, the adoration of this deity alone.” (BU, Mādhavānanda 1950).

23 *saṃvatsarasya pratimām yām tvā rātry upāsmāhe | sā na āyusmatīm prajāṃ rāyas poṣeṇa saṃ sṛja || (atharva. 3.10.3) (VP, p. 1616 and RVBB, p. 349).*

shall worship you as that (the night as the *pratimā*, *parimāṇa* of the full year).²⁴

Svāmī Karapātrī here, for the sake of his argument, recalls that Ārya Samājīs do not perform icon worship because they believe it to be the veneration of “non-conscious beings” (*acetana*).²⁵ In this case, Svāmī Dayānanda’s explanation of AV 3.10.3 becomes problematic, as it resembles a prompting to the worship of the non-conscious (*acetana*). In fact, if one maintains that *mūrti pūjā* is a “wrong practice” mainly because it corresponds to the worship of the non-conscious, by urging the veneration of “the night” as “the measure” of the full year, Svāmī Dayānanda is caught approving of this “wrong practice”. “The night” here is a “measure” (*parimāṇa*) of the full year (*saṃvatsara*), the measure is a quality (*guṇa*), and the quality is a non-conscious entity. In his *SP*, Svāmī Dayānanda (*SP*, Prasad 1981: 113) reports from the Vaiśeṣikasūtra (*VS* 1.1.4) “the six categories of existence”: *dravya*, *guṇa*, *karman*, *sāmānya*, *viśeṣa* and *samavāya*. It is through these “six categories of existence” that reality, *dravya* or substance, is manifested. The *guṇa*, one of these categories of manifestation, is of 24 types, among which, together with form (*rūpa*), taste (*rasa*), smell (*gandha*), touch (*sparsā*) and number (*saṃkhyā*), we also find measure (*parimāṇa*). In the *SP* (*SP*, Prasad 1981: 115), Svāmī Dayānanda writes that *parimāṇa* is “what shows weight, as light, heavy”. Therefore, even according to Svāmī Dayānanda, the measure, or *parimāṇa*, is one of the qualities inherent to *dravya*, which is indeed a non-conscious being. Consequently, *parimāṇa* itself, which is here “the night” that is “the measure” of “the full year” (*saṃvatsara*), is a non-conscious entity; and it would be absurd to conceive that a quality inherent in an insentient being is, in fact, sentient. Svāmī Karapātrī thus comments:

24 *vidvāṃsaḥ saṃvatsarasya yāṃ pratimāṃ parimāṇam upāsate vayam api tvā tām evopāsmāhe* | (*VP*, p. 1616 and *RVBB*, p. 349). The English translation of this verse by Parmanand (Sarasvatī, Parmanand 1981: 387) is as follows, “The learned hold (the night) as the measure (pratimā) of the year. May we also accept the night as such.” I believe that *upāsmāhe* is better translated as “worship”, and that this choice of the translator might have been a later attempt of “protecting” the consistency of Svāmī Dayānanda’s argument.

25 *ayaṃ abhiprāyaḥ – mūrtipūjācetanatvād eva mūrtenāṅgīkriyate sāmājikaiḥ* | (*VP*, p. 1616).

[...] in this mantra, the worship of the measure (or *pratimā*, that is the night) is accepted. But this is [the same] as worshipping the non-conscious (*acetana*), since everyone agrees that a quality (*guṇa*) in the form of a measure (*parimāṇa*) is a non-conscious entity.²⁶

Moreover, a full year (*saṃvatsara*) is only a specific time (*kālavīṣeṣa*) measured in one year. The measure (*parimāṇa*) is only a special quality (*guṇavīṣeṣa*) located in that (*saṃvatsara*). Both – *kālavīṣeṣa* (the specific time that is *saṃvatsara*, the full year) and *guṇavīṣeṣa* (the specific measure that is the night) – are non-conscious.²⁷

After having demonstrated that the worship of the night as the measure of the full year is like the veneration of a non-conscious being, Svāmī Karapātrī expresses the doubt that Svāmī Dayānanda might have referred to the existence of a tutelary deity presiding over the time period as the real recipient of the worship. However, Svāmī Karapātrī concludes, this would also go against Svāmī Dayānanda's firm point that there are no divine entities in this world, apart from the formless Īśvara.

If it was accepted that some consciousness was presiding over the time of one full year (*saṃvatsara*), and that it had to be worshipped as a deity, then this alone would be a statement in contradiction with your own teachings.²⁸

In summary, Svāmī Karapātrī wished to invalidate one of the fundamental arguments put forward by Svāmī Dayānanda against the institution of *mūrti pūjā*. Here, Svāmī Karapātrī wishes to prove that the iconoclast Svāmī Dayānanda himself is inadvertently enjoining the worship of the non-conscious when commenting on AV 3.10.3: is Svāmī Dayānanda enjoining the worship of the full year (*kālavīṣeṣa*), or is Svāmī Dayānanda

26 *param asmin mantre saṃvatsarasya pratimopāsanam aṅgīkṛtam | idam apy acetanāsyavopāsanam | parimāṇarūpasya guṇasya sarvair apy acetanatvāṅgīkārāt |* (VP, p. 1616–1617).

27 *saṃvatsaro 'pi varṣaparimitaḥ kālavīṣeṣa eva | tanniṣṭho guṇavīṣeṣa eva parimāṇam | ubhāv apy acetanāv eva |* (VP, p. 1617).

28 *yadi saṃvatsarakālādhiṣṭhātrī kācic cetanā devatopāsyatvenāṅgīkriyate, tadā tavāpasiddhānta eva syāt |* (VP, p. 1617).

enjoining the worship of the night as the quality (*guṇaviśeṣa*) located within the full year? Both these possibilities are problematic, since they are, in fact, a veneration of the non-conscious, which goes against Svāmī Dayānanda’s fundamental principles. Is Svāmī Dayānanda enjoining the worship of a tutelary deity residing within the full year? This would also be self-contradictory, as Svāmī Dayānanda clearly states that there are no gods, but only one: Īśvara.

5. Conclusions

In his preface to the translation of the *RVBB*, even Parmanand observes that Svāmī Dayānanda has often deliberately interpreted several Vedic mantras without referring to the traditional readings, thus generating new meanings and conclusions. However, Svāmī Dayānanda never suggested that he was producing new meanings of the Vedas, but rather that he was the one retrieving their true purport. Here, the scholarly debate revolves around one’s ability to prove their adherence to the ancient authoritative texts (*pramāṇa*) as well as the consistency of their own statements. In the *VP*, Svāmī Karapātrī aims at undermining both Svāmī Dayānanda’s adherence and consistency; consequently, invalidating the credibility of his discourse. First of all, in response to Svāmī Dayānanda’s argument that there are no injunctions to *mūrti pūjā* and *nāma smaraṇa* in the Vedas, but rather a prohibition against them, Svāmī Karapātrī accuses him of having misunderstood the textual authorities (*śāstrābodha*). After reporting a few instances from the Vedas (*RV* 1.156.3 and 2.13.4) that seem to disprove Svāmī Dayānanda’s statement, Svāmī Karapātrī accuses him of *svoktivirodha* (self-contradiction) and of *apasiddhānta* (inconsistency), when the founder of the Ārya Samāja first states that the word *pratimā* has only the meaning of *parimāṇa* (measure) and then interprets it in the sense of “icon”. In traditional scholarly debates, such accusations of inconsistency and self-contradiction are indeed reasons for losing a debate (*ŚM* 1.1.5). The case looked at in this article is an example of Svāmī Karapātrī’s method of defending the Vedas from Svāmī Dayānanda’s exegesis.

The *VP* is a Sanskrit composition supplied with a Hindi commentary written in a technical language following the argumentative principles of Mīmāṃsā. This work was not designed to reach the Hindu masses;

nonetheless, it entered and powerfully fueled the intellectual debate between Ārya Samājīs and Sanātānists. The *VP* was even added to the syllabus of certain Vedic schools, becoming part of the curriculum for obtaining the Ācārya degree. As mentioned above, the *RVBB* was supposed to be the introductory volume to Svāmī Dayānanda's exegesis of the Vedas. In the same way, the *VP* was also designed as an introduction to Svāmī Karapātrī's commentary on the four Saṃhitās. Even if neither of the two scholars could actually complete the task, their introductory volumes made a great impression on the intellectual community. In fact, the *VP* was followed in 1984 by a response from the Ārya Samāja with publication of the *Vedārthakalpadruma* by Viśudhānanda Miśra, published by the Sarvadeśika Ārya Pratiṣṭhāna in New Delhi. Again, in 1988, the *Vedārthakalpadruma* was followed by a Sanātānist response by the Purī Śaṅkarācārya Svāmī Nirañjanadeva Tīrtha with the *Vedārthapārijātabhāṣyavārtika*, published by the Govardhana Maṭha Śaṅkarācārya Pīṭha.

The existence of several publications as responses to each other reveals the importance of the debate. During a colloquium with Anand Mishra of the Banaras Hindu University (an expert on this field), he confirmed to me that the discourse between the Ārya Samāja and Sanātānists remains very much alive; nowadays, many of the Ārya Samāja positions have been silently accepted by the majority of Hindus, but the practice of *mūrti pūjā* remains as one of the few resistant Sanātānist badges in modern India.

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