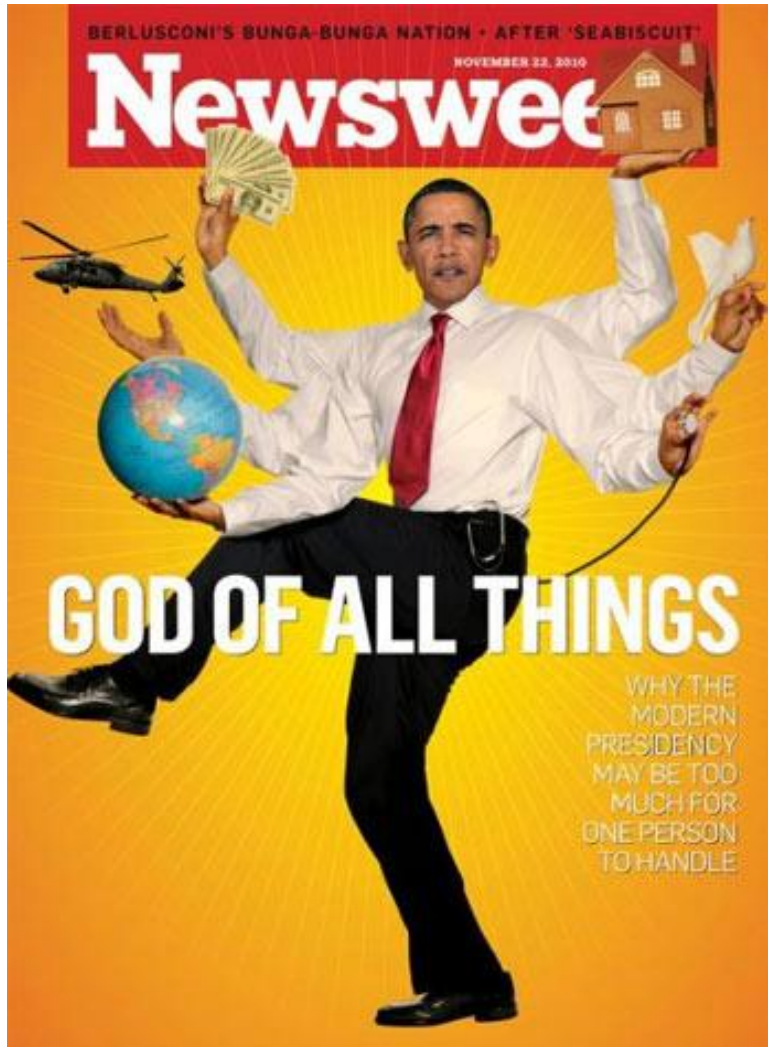


The cosmic dance of Obama-Raja on Newsweek

By Pankaj Jain

A recent issue of Newsweek has on its cover page President Barack Obama in the cosmic dance pose of the Hindu deity Lord Nataraja (some have called it the Obama-Raja posture).



Within a matter of hours after Newsweek depicted this image on its website, several Hindu organizations, Hindu websites, Hindus on social media sites, started reacting to this portrayal of one of their major gods. This also caught the attention of several scholars of Hinduism. Unlike many other issues in the past, this latest episode of Hindu deities used or misused in non-religious context in the West aroused mixed reactions both from practicing Hindus and from practicing and non-practicing scholars of Hinduism. Some shrugged it off saying that portrayal of Hindu deities is quite common even in the commercial advertisements in India and that the Hindu texts were full of such humorous references to their gods and goddesses. Others compared and contrasted such portrayal with Abrahmic religions and demanded the fair and balanced treatment of Hinduism in popular culture.

I think in addition to all the above reactions and responses, there are few more 'cosmic' questions that we can raise from this Obama-Raja 'cosmic' dance posture. For one, why should we let the hyper-active media dominate our thought process? Granted that we live in a 24/7 global media spin-machine, but should we only react to what and how media chooses to write and portray? Media, as a profit making business in most cases, chooses to sensationalize even trivial issues such as the President of a major nation trying to multi-task his responsibilities. Worse, even the academic world seems to be susceptible to such sensationalized patterns.

Just as an instance, in the last more than sixty years of India's independence, there can be several success stories that can be role-model for several other developing nations in the world. However, what gets most attention of the media - and of scholars - are the controversial topics such as the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, deployment of martial law style 'emergency' by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975, destruction of the (Babri) Mosque in 1992, or the Hindu Muslim violence in 2002. These events have continued to represent the historic milestones in the history of independent India even as the millions of Indians made remarkable progress in basic literacy and thousands of Indians reached almost every part of the USA and the rest of the world with their software and other technological skills. Several other epidemics and other gigantic problems were quietly eradicated from India.

The success of Indian democracy and pluralism remains one of the most understated stories in the recent history of humankind which is what caught my attention when President Obama mentioned this in glorious terms when he addressed the Indian parliament. Unfortunately, these historic remarks were not sensational enough for many and were relegated to quiet archives of news while Obama-Raja image suddenly woke everybody up. Ironies of 'cosmic' proportions indeed!

Perhaps, more direct question is of the portrayal itself of the Hindu and other religions in the academia and media. Aren't Hindus familiar with the humorous references to their gods in their own texts and in their urban billboards and advertisements? Aren't they aware of poet-saints like Kabir who ridiculed several Hindu (and Muslim) superstitions and other social practices of that time? Why do Hindus continue to revere one of the most vocal critics of Hindu practices like Kabir while they react quite differently when their symbols and legends are portrayed or critiqued by contemporary academia and media?

One way to interpret this could be to remind ourselves that the social reformers like Gandhi and Kabir despite their vociferous criticism for some of the social practices, had deep love and reverence for humans irrespective of their caste, creed, or religion. This may also be the place to mention that Lord Shiva (another manifestation of Lord Nataraja in Hindu tradition) is often portrayed by Hindus as one who drinks poison but adorns the moon on his head. This is frequently interpreted to mean that the 'good' of others must be decorated upfront but the 'bad' must be hidden within us. Before critiquing, criticising, or ridiculing others, one must find their qualities to appreciate and magnify. I can only imagine how this Hindu method of social interaction could help foster world peace and harmony. And in the style of Lord Shiva, let's meditate on this biggest 'cosmic' question of our times!

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http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/guestvoices/2010/11/the_cosmic_questions_behind_the_cosmic_dance_of_obama-raja_on_newsweek.html