Deity worship and eclipses

Position Paper - ISKCON Deity Worship Ministry

Position statement

Regular daily deity worship in ISKCON centers must be carried out without interruption during an eclipse. If there are concerns regarding local public sentiment that may be caused by continuing the deity worship, the temple may be closed to the public while privately maintaining the scheduled daily worship of the deities.

Introduction

> *yan no bhayaṁ grahebhyo 'bhūt ketubhyo nṛbhya eva ca*
> *sarīsṛpebhyo daṁṣṭribhyo bhūtebhyo 'ṁhobhya eva ca*
>
> *sarvāṇy etāni bhagavan-nāma-rūpānukīrtanāt*
> *prayāntu saṅkṣayaṁ sadyo ye naḥ śreyaḥ-pratīpakāḥ*

May the glorification of the transcendental name, form, qualities and paraphernalia of the Supreme Personality of Godhead protect us from the influence of bad planets, meteors, envious human beings, serpents, scorpions, and animals like tigers and wolves. May it protect us from ghosts and the material elements like earth, water, fire and air, and may it also protect us from lightning and our past sins. We are always afraid of these hindrances to our auspicious life. Therefore, may they all be completely destroyed by the chanting of the Hare Kṛṣṇa mahā-mantra.

SB 6.8.27–28

The general understanding gleaned from the teachings of our *acaryas* and the holy scriptures is that the only solution to the calamities of this material world is to take shelter of the Lord's holy name.

Above is ISKCON Deity Worship Ministry's position regarding deity worship during an eclipse. The remainder of this document offers supporting evidence to establish this position. This document does NOT address the personal daily activities of devotees in relation to eclipses, other than to state that Śrīla Prabhupāda did not make any adjustments to his daily schedule during the occurrence of an eclipse.

Supporting evidence

While not finding any specific instructions of our Founder-*Ācārya* regarding deity worship during eclipses, the general principle established by Srila Prabhupada is that deity worship should not be stopped in any situation as explained in a letter to Amsu dasa dated 13 August 1974. This is also consistent with Srila Prabhupada's personal example as recorded by his direct disciples as referenced in the section entitled *'Anecdotal evidence*', and confirmed by Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakur in his statement below. The argument that eclipses are contaminated or inauspicious is not supported by *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa*, 2.28–30 and *Caitanya-bhāgavata*, *Adi-Khanda*, 1.96.

From our acaryas:

The following references are quoted to establish our understanding of the mood of our *acaryas*—particularly that of Srila Prabhupāda.

> One thing is that the seva can never be stopped for any reason. This also for the cooking.
>
> Letter to: Amsu: — Vrindaban 13 August, 1974

> The period of an eclipse is supposed to be inauspicious, according to the opinion of smartas, and so they abstain from all those activities which they normally avoid during any contaminated period. But the devotees who follow the process of regulative devotional service should, if possible, serve the Supreme Lord as usual without caring for such mundane rules.
>
> Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakura
> The duties of a practitioner of regulative devotional service during an eclipse
> (Sri Gaudiya Matha, Calcutta, September 27, 1922)

> Dr. Patel: Are we not observing this eclipse rituals, that, during the eclipse we stop aratis and all of this...
>
> Prabhupāda: Why?
>
> Dr. Patel: And after the eclipse is over, take bath and then do the arati?
>
> Prabhupāda: Yes, they take bath.
>
> Dr. Patel: Even the other Vaishnava mandirs don't do arati during that period if it comes within that...
>
> Prabhupāda: Hare Krishna.
>
> Morning Walk: November 17, 1975

This conversation took place in Mumbai on November 17, 1975. The following day was a total lunar eclipse when Śrīla Prabhupāda gave *sannyasa* initiation to one of his disciples. The initiation took place in front of the deities in the temple room and the regular worship of the deities continued uninterrupted during the time of the eclipse. The penumbral eclipse ended at 7:05 am on November 19, 1975.

From sastra:

> In the *Rudra-yamala* it is said: "At a holy place, or during a solar or lunar eclipse, or during the Pavitraropana festival (the full-moon day of the month of *sravana*, when Lord Krsna accepted the sacred-thread), or during the Damanakaropana festival (in the month of Caitra), one may accept mantra initiation without considering the purity of the month, stars, or anything else.
>
> All auspicious moments and auspicious situations of the moon and stars always reside in those situations. A person who accepts mantra initiation in one of these situations attains long life, wealth, and good children.
>
> No auspicious time is equal to the time of the solar or lunar eclipse. Whatever auspicious deed is done at that time brings limitless benefit. During the Surya-parva times (solar solstices, equinoxes, or eclipses) there is no consideration of purity of the month, day, day of the week, or anything else.
>
> *Hari-bhakti-vilāsa*, 2.28–30

> People throughout the world considered the occasion of the lunar eclipse as most auspicious, so they engaged in loud chanting of the names of Hari. The Lord appeared as this chanting was going on.
>
> *Caitanya-bhāgavata*, *Adi-Khanda*, 1.96

Anecdotal evidence

Hari-sauri prabhu:

> “... when I first moved to Vrindavana in 1975 there was an eclipse. Śrīla Prabhupāda told us to follow the same observances as the other temples in Vrindavana. I think that we closed the temple to the public, but the deity worship was maintained as normal, and we had our 24 hrs. kirtan going on throughout.”

Malati devi, a long-time *pujari* personally trained by Śrīla Prabhupāda:

> “His instruction was clear: Go out and hold hari-nama-sankirtan. The other thing is that, there was never an instant where he instructed us NOT to perform deity seva.”

Srutakirti prabhu, a long-time personal servant of Śrīla Prabhupāda:

> “I was with Prabhupāda the entire year of 1973, some of ’74 and ’75. There were at least 6 eclipses during that time. There were no special arrangements that were made throughout the day regarding cooking, massage or other areas of my service. Srila Prabhupada was very regulated in his daily routine.”

HH Niranjana Swami:

> "It was truly business as usual within our temples during Prabhupāda's stay on the planet. Any changes that we see regarding observance of eclipses have crept in after his departure—probably due to excessive pressure from local devotees to conform to local traditions. This is wrong. If stopping deity services during eclipse time was so important, Śrīla Prabhupāda would have instructed us on this. But he never asked us to suspend or interrupt Deity services even once during those 11 years!"

Ramesvara prabhu, a manager of both ISKCON Los Angeles as well as the BBT:

> “For many years Śrīla Prabhupāda had Srimati Silavati devi train pujaris from New Dwaraka in the standards of deity worship when we first acquired the (current) New Dwaraka temple in 1969. We never observed separate protocols or practices on eclipses.”[1]

Visnugada prabhu, another senior disciple of Śrīla Prabhupada:

> “I do not remember doing anything special during eclipses when Śrīla Prabhupāda was on the planet. I never read or came across anything Śrīla Prabhupāda directly recommended his followers do during eclipses. Yes, Deity worship continued uninterrupted during eclipses.”

Purnaprajna prabhu, one of the pujaris in the Calcutta temple during Śrīla Prabhupāda’s time:

> “I consulted my memory and also called Rupanuga and discussed this at length and also chatted with Narayani. All of us agree that Prabhupāda never gave special instructions for eclipses and Narayani, who was a pujari along with me in Calcutta during Prabhupāda's presence, is sure that we made no changes to the deity worship.”

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[1] *It is worthwhile to note that Srila Prabhupada often referred to our Los Angeles temple as his world headquarters. And he wanted all other temples to serve the deities as per the standards he set in the New Dwaraka center.*

Dhananjaya prabhu:

> “Srila Prabhupāda personally told me when I was Vrindaban TP in 1975 to follow exactly what the other temples were doing as far as eclipses were concerned.
>
> “All the deity worship was carried out behind closed doors.”

Counter arguments

- A prevalent view in some circles is that eclipses are inauspicious and contaminating, and therefore deity worship should not be performed. It is believed that:
    - The deity becomes contaminated
    - The worshiper becomes contaminated
    - The utensils and ingredients of worship become contaminated.

- Others will criticize ISKCON and its leaders if we continue the worship.

Responses to counter arguments

Eclipses are inauspicious

From the material perspective eclipses may be considered inauspicious. According to *Caitanya-caritāmṛta*, Antya 4.176, as quoted above, all these considerations are false. *Hari-bhakti-vilasa* 2.28–30 opines that eclipses are the most auspicious times for spiritual activities.

Contamination of the deity:

The deity of the Lord, being non-different from the Lord, can never be contaminated. Śrīla Prabhupada in a letter mentions this is a consideration of *smarta brahmanas*.

> As for bathing the deities in milk from time to time, that is not required. The smarta or caste brahmanas, they think if someone inattentively touches deity it becomes impure, so they bathe. But that is not needed by us, only when they are installed.
>
> Letter to: Kirtanananda — Vrindaban 27 October, 1972

As described in *Sri Isopanisad* 8 and *Bhagavad-gita* 10.12, the Lord is completely pure and uncontaminated.

Contamination of the worshiper:

By definition the material body is contaminated. By following the various rituals prescribed, the worshiper purifies the gross and subtle elements of their body, thus enabling them to worship the Lord. In the process described as *bhuta-suddhi*, the ultimate purification is remembrance of the Lord by reciting various prayers—in particular *naham vipro*…

Contamination of the utensils and ingredients of worship

The very nature of the ingredients that are offered to the deity is they are material. By *proksana*, sprinkling with water while chanting mantras, the items of worship are spiritualized and brought to a state equivalent to that of the Lord.

The public will criticize ISKCON and its leaders if we continue the worship:

Particularly in India, this may be more of a concern. Therefore, Śrīla Prabhupāda directed devotees to close the temple to the public if necessary in order to minimize public criticism—while continuing the worship as usual.