

# Why India is a land of 'murti' and 'vigraha' and not idols and idolators as perceived by the West

By [Vicky Nanjappa](#) | Updated: Wednesday, August 31, 2022, 15:23 [IST]

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***For the Europeans who came here, the 'Murti' and 'Vigraha' appeared as mere objects of art. They did not occupy any space in their hearts. So, they called these forms as idols and termed this offering derogatorily as "idol worship".***

**New Delhi, Aug 31:** With the Ganesh Chaturthi festivities commencing, a word that one would very often hear is idol. India has, for centuries, been branded by the West as a land of idols and idolators. Using the terms idols and idolators has also been one of the arguments to put down the Indian traditions as being regressive in thought and to also highlight the Abrahamic faiths as being progressive and thinking, say Bharath Gyan Founders Dr D K Hari and Dr Hema Hari.

In Indian art, the English term 'icon' is usually used to refer to a metal figurine such as a bronze icon, whereas 'idol' has been commonly associated to mean a figurine, a statue worthy of worship.



The difference between an icon and idol lies in how it is seen as being held in worship. An idol is defined as the object of worship itself, while an icon is defined as an object pointing to something greater worthy of reverence, the Bharath Gyan founders write in their book, 'Understanding Sabarimala Swamy Ayyappa'.

In the English vocabulary, therefore, icons are what the Colonials prayed to, while idols are what others worshipped.



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Idols have thus been given a negative connotation as being something that is worshipped for itself, forgetting the cause behind. Worshiping an idol or a person other than God is defined as idolatry in English.

This narrative that has been set has become so strong that a majority, including Hindus, continue to refer to the Hindu deities erroneously as idols while speaking in English and the basics of Hindu forms of worship and the Hindu expression of Divinity keep getting forgotten more and more with the usage of such Anglicized terms.

That narrative needs to change. Idol is a very western concept, explains Dr Hari.

But, if you should not call it a Ganesha idol then what should you call it?

The right terms to be used are 'Vigraha' and 'Murthy / Murti'.

The deities we keep at home and temples are 'Vigrahas' or 'Murti'. What we keep as a showpiece or in the garden cannot be referred to as a 'Vigraha' and 'Murti'.



**(Dr. D.K.Hari and Dr. D.K.Hema Hari are compilers and authors on Indian Civilization Knowledge. More details can be found at [www.bharathgyan.com](http://www.bharathgyan.com))**

Explaining this further, they say that 'Murti' is that which embodies something and is considered to be living after the consecration process called 'praana prathishta'. Hence it cannot be referred to as a lifeless idol.

Likewise, to understand Vigraha, we need to understand the base word Graha. 'Graha' denotes occupied space. It comes from the root 'graha' which means to take, possess, occupy.

When you enter a house you perform a 'grahapravesha.' It is to denote that you will be occupying that chosen space of a house in the vast space of land around, just like earth occupies its space in the vast Space. It is similar to the Sun and Moon too, Hari and Hema say.

They also add that the word 'Graha' used in Indian astronomy, Jyotisha, does not necessarily mean planet alone as it is often misrepresented. It denotes any object in Space that occupies some space. This includes the lunar node points such as Rahu and Ketu, as they are also the space in the Sky which will be occupied during an eclipse by the moon in its orbit around the earth. Thus, Graha actually denotes the space occupied by anything in Space.



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A wife is called a grahini as she is the queen of the house while the husband is called a grahastha. That means he is occupying the house with his wife and family. Graha is to occupy a marked space, be it physical or emotional, in the heart - wherever it may be, both in the gross and subtle.

Gross is 'sthoola' and subtle, 'sukshma'. Even something as small in the atomic structure, still occupies space, the founders of Bharath Gyan say.

The 'Murti' that you propitiate to, occupies a space in two ways.

The Murti, as a physical body, occupies a physical space on the 'graha' (earth).

The 'Murti' also occupies a space in your heart.

Hence, in a simplistic way we can call it a 'Vigraha.' The prefix 'vi' and 'graha' denotes that it occupies a special place. It is deeply entrenched in our hearts.

While there are more profound ways to explain and understand what a Vigraha is and why Hindus revere a Vigraha, as explained in their book "Understanding Sabarimala Swamy Ayyappa"- simply put, it is that which holds a special place in one's heart, home, temple and in the scheme of things. It is a special place indeed as this is in the realm of the Divine, Dr Hari and Dr Hema say.

Murti and Vigraha have embodied and represented the Divine through their forms and Puja has been a way of doing samarpan, surrendering everything unto the Divine, through these forms. A way to pour everything from inside, out.

For the Europeans who came here, the 'Murti' and 'Vigraha' appeared as mere objects of art.

They did not occupy any space in their hearts. So, when they saw people offering their bhakti - love, devotion and everything to the murti, they called these forms as idols and termed this offering derogatorily as "idol worship".

But, for a person with 'bhakti' who does the 'Murti' puja, it occupies a space in the heart, with a reason and with a reference. It is adulation and not mere idolation.

Hence such Murtis and Vighraha cannot be limitedly termed as an idol, but should be given the special place they occupy in the heart of a 'bhakta', Dr Hema says.

Ganesha Chaturthi, a time when millions bring home a Murti of Lord Ganesha and perform pujas to this Murti for 10 days before returning the Murti back to its source of form, is an ideal window to make a resolve to start referring to such embodying forms of the Divinities as Murti or Vighraha, rather than as idols. It is time to change the narrative.

May Lord Ganesha set the beginning and remove obstacles in the path.

Read online at [https://www.oneindia.com/india/why-india-is-a-land-of-murti-and-vighraha-and-not-idols-and-idolators-as-perceived-by-the-west-3455405.html?utm\\_source=/india/why-india-is-a-land-of-murti-and-vighraha-and-not-idols-and-idolators-as-perceived-by-the-west-3455405.html&utm\\_medium=search\\_page&utm\\_campaign=elastic\\_search](https://www.oneindia.com/india/why-india-is-a-land-of-murti-and-vighraha-and-not-idols-and-idolators-as-perceived-by-the-west-3455405.html?utm_source=/india/why-india-is-a-land-of-murti-and-vighraha-and-not-idols-and-idolators-as-perceived-by-the-west-3455405.html&utm_medium=search_page&utm_campaign=elastic_search)