When Work is Worship: Technology, Labor and the Figure of Vishwakarma—“Maker of the Universe”

Although Vishwakarma worship in India has long been associated with hereditary artisan castes and their hand tools, Vishwakarma’s presence has moved beyond craft workshops and into workplaces associated with the country’s infrastructural systems and networks: factories, engineering schools, design studios, public works departments, and industrial parks. The increasingly public visibility of Vishwakarma worship across India since 1900 shows unmistakable ties to the rise of industrial capitalism in that country and to promulgating an ethos of technological skill and craftsmanship among the broad workforce. In this context, the figure of Vishwakarma is part of an ethical armature for contemporary techno-economic systems. Meanwhile, this god has figured, too, in over a century of scholarly works that have set him apart from the predations and perils of industrial capitalism. The aim of this paper is to rethink the historical and socio-theological warrant for the god’s techno-ideological location in disciplinary literatures, in shrines, and on the factory floor.

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