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COMMENTARY

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Moving to America didn't mean I had to leave my favorite Deities and festivals behind in India

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Ever since I can remember, God always played an integral part in my traditional Tamil brahmin upbringing in Delhi. I would wake up to the sound of tinkling bells emanating from our shrine room where my parents would be seated on cane mats reciting aloud Sanskrit chants and offering fresh flowers before a bevy of Gods, the morning sun adding even more dazzle to the Deities' ornamental glory.

When I would come back from school, the lingering redolence of incense from the day's puja worship would tickle my nostrils even before the delectable aroma of the special dishes to be offered in the worship, such as payasam and kesari from my mother's kitchen, could enslave my olfactory senses.

In my devout Hindu family, not a day passed without a puja, not a week elapsed without at least one visit to temples and not a month went by without marking some festival or other on the Tamil Hindu calendar. By the time I hit my teens, in addition to popular festivals such as Janmashtami, I was also able to rattle off the names of numerous lesser-known religious occasions such as Karadayan Nombu (observed by married women for the longevity of their husbands) or Maavilakku (for the prosperity of the family). Just a glance at the special dishes being prepared for a specific puja was enough for me to guess the festival being celebrated. For instance, ezhu than kootu--a stew prepared with seven vegetables--meant it was Thiruvadurai in honor of Lord Siva, or the pointed tips of glistening sweet modakams signaled the arrival of Ganesh Chaturti.

My grandparents and parents never lost an opportunity to teach me new chants, explaining the significance of each and the God for whom it must be recited. I understood that each God has specific powers in the celestial space: Ganesha removes obstacles, Lakshmi showers wealth, Hanuman gives prowess, Siva blesses women with good husbands, and so on. Such constant familiarity with God had me sometimes grumbling to my parents about going to temples more often than necessary. And it wasn't as if I saw a simultaneous reflection of rewards from the heavens in return for my dutiful religious actions, such as inscribing "Shri Ramajayam " in Sanskrit atop a letter addressed to my grandmother. My faith in the almighty was especially shaken when I once flunked math in spite of memorizing the difficult Shyamaladandakam, the powerful Sanskrit chant for Saraswati that assures success in academics. Once again I questioned the existence of Gods when my pimples didn't miraculously disappear after a dip in the holy Ganges in Haridwar. I only hope, to this day, that I had better luck with my sins.

My protests about my family's overly religious ways came to an abrupt halt when I moved to the US. Suddenly, there were no bells to wake me up, lighting incense sticks became bothersome due to the sensitive smoke alarm in the apartment, and the nearest "temple " was a distant sixty miles away. To make matters worse, I was in for a disappointment when I first saw the "Hindu Cultural Center, " which didn't boast of any statuesque Chola-type temple architecture replete with ornate entrance towers. I learned that it was formerly someone's house and that most Hindu temples in the US bear architectural affinity to this one. It also frustrated me that I had to increasingly depend on long-distance phone calls to my family and friendly e-mail reminders from my mother to alert me to the arrival of each of those festivities I had once taken for granted. Let's just say that it was a humbling experience for me and a tad amusing for my parents, who saw a deeply religious side of their daughter surface on a different continent.

Within a few months of my newfound spiritual awakening on foreign shores, I realized the need to connect with God in ways my parents had taught me to. I set up a small puja space in the bedroom, visited the temple as often as I could and recited all those chants with alarming regularity. But this wasn't enough to nourish me spiritually.

Now in the US, in the absence of my folks' guiding presence to veer my religious destiny, my hunger for finding God led me to rediscovering Him on the Internet. It all started with my Googling "Saibaba, " which took me to the home page of the Shirdi Saibaba web site (<http://www.saibaba.org>), where not only did I have His darshan (sight of the divine), but was also treated to melodious Saibaba hymns. For

a divine moment I was magically transported to the Shirdi shrine in Nasik, Maharashtra--which I have visited in the past--but this time minus the meandering queues leading up to his enshrined statue.

This e-experience had me hooked. And still has, in my seventh year in the US. It's like fast food for the soul. Whenever I am in the mood for having a darshan of a particular God, all I have to do is Google His name. The God of my preference lights up my computer screen with a click of the mouse and I don't even have to struggle for His glimpse like in an actual temple. I take my own time savoring the beautiful image of Balaji and His two consorts on Tirupati's official web site (<http://www.tirumala.org>) without having to bother with jostling crowds and strict temple authorities interrupting my darshan as they generally do in the Tirupati Devasthanam.

My e-pilgrimages not only take me to temples I have never visited, but also offer added privileges, like allowing me to partake in real-time worship and order special pujas of my choice--all from the convenience of my laptop. Moreover, unlike real temples, these e-darshans are accessible 24/7, paying scant heed to God's noon-time or late-night rest requirements. However, I do make it a point to remove my footwear before I enter God's online sanctum sanctorum. There are no shortcuts for some habits.

My parents are now so accustomed to my online temple visits that they occasionally advise me to go to a particular Deity's web site for adding to my treasury of punya, religious merit. Like the other day, my mother told me to visit Garbaratchambikai Devi's web site (<http://www.garbaratchambikai.com>) to seek Her blessings for progeny. The Goddess, who is known to grant children to couples, is now on my favorite lists. While vacationing in India, I no longer take my temple visits for granted. I genuinely feel happy to go "temple-hopping " (the term used by my amused husband) with my parents and feel equally blessed to see God on my desktop when I return to the US.

Kausalya Saptharishi is a freelance journalist living in New Jersey with her husband. She is grateful to the Internet for bringing her closer to God.