

[A Life Changing Puja](#)

Category : [November 1999](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 1999

A Life Changing Puja

How the Goddess captured me forever

Stephen P. Huyler

I had been to Padmapoda, a village in eastern India, a number of times previously to visit the family of a close friend. Each time, I was taken to see the sacred tree that embodies the local Goddess, Gelubai, the Deity of the community. But this visit brought an unprecedented honor: being allowed to witness the ceremony of invocation in which the dynamic power of the supreme Goddess Chandi was requested. It was a very special ritual, enacted on rare occasions to implore the aid of the Goddess in overcoming a difficult domestic problem. The entire ritual had already taken two priests two hours: preparing and dressing the image of the Goddess, drawing a sacred diagram upon the ground, building a fire on it, and feeding that fire with clarified butter (ghee), all the while singing Her names and praises. As a middle-aged cultural anthropologist and art historian who had already spent more than half my life studying India, I prided myself with my objectivity. I might feel empathy toward a particular subject or situation, but as a scholar I tried to distance myself to observe and take notes.

Despite my resistance at that moment, as the fire flared brightly and the spirit of the Goddess was invoked to enter the

tree and be available to the village, I actually felt Her presence. I felt a change in the atmosphere: a palpable sense of power, pulsating, vibrating energy, the strength of which I had never before sensed. I was completely surprised, overwhelmed beyond any expectation. In that one moment I, who had come as an observer, had become a participant. That insight altered and enriched my perception, allowing me to release decades of self-identity as an objective outsider. My personal and professional life was changed. I was transformed.

I have always found the Indian people to be remarkably hospitable, opening their hearts and their lives to me with generous candor. People have always invited me into their homes, to witness and share in their private lives and feelings. I have been fascinated by Hindu spirituality, by the ways in which conscious awareness of the Divine permeates every aspect of daily and seasonal life. But for a young American raised in a strong Christian family, much of it seemed obtuse and confusing.

Now when I am invited to attend a sacred ceremony, I no longer withhold myself in critical appraisal. I am fully present. I realize my earlier distance was merely the consequence of my own limitations. The many Indians I have interacted with always invited my full participation. For years it was I who held myself apart. My Western heritage and my unconscious miscomprehension of image worship blinded me from deeper understanding. Now I can admire and even be in awe of the ways in which the sacred permeates the lives of the Hindu people while still maintaining strong attachments to my own home, family, friends, culture, and ideals. Awareness of one only enriches awareness of the other.

Long before I knew what was happening, I was being offered a deep trust. By opening their homes and their hearts to me, in sharing their private personal and sacred thoughts with me, countless individuals in India have consciously and unconsciously made me an emissary. I understand now that I can serve as a bridge between two cultures. I have long felt the deep need to set aright the extraordinary imbalance of Western opinions of India. Projections assert that India will be a leading world power within the next few decades. It is remarkable that as India modernizes, as her people grow into leading proponents of an innovative and contemporary world, their sense of religion and spirituality is not diminished. Hinduism is still as vital to the lives of the Indian people as it has ever been. It is a belief system in complete harmony with change, adaptation, modernization and growth.

Stephen P. Huyler is an art historian, cultural anthropologist and photographer. See BOOKS for an article on his newest book.