Honoring the Spirit of Community
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Educational Insight

Honoring the Spirit of Community

A Personal Revelation about Ways of Worship at Village Shrines in India

Excerpts from Stephen P. Huyler's Classic Work: Meeting God, Elements of Hindu Devotion

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Village Mysticism

Each Hindu community on the Indian subcontinent has its own Gramadevata, literally "village Divinity," the Deity regarded as synonymous with the locality and everything within it. Just as the home is viewed as a composite of the spirits of all of its inhabitants and of the materials that went into its construction, so also is the community a blend of its physical, spiritual and emotional components. Every house, every street, all of the shops, the craft studios, the barns, the farms, the trees and bushes, the wells, the reservoirs and streams, the inhabitants (people, animals and insects), the spirits of those who have lived and died there, and even the activities, thoughts and emotions of everyone living there--all are part of one great spirit identified as a Deity, a Gramadevata. This Deity is the community, just as the community is the Deity. They are inseparable.

Towns and cities have many individual subsections, each of which usually has its own Gramadevata. For example, every small locality in the Rajasthan city of Jodhpur has a God or Goddess that has been worshiped in that spot for as long as the community has existed. While most cities are internally divided into numerous smaller entities, a municipality may also be viewed as one great Deity, interwoven with all the inclusive Gramadevatas.

In this way, the entire southern Indian city of Madurai is believed to be the Goddess Meenakshi, the Gramadevata of the initial community that lived there. Her

power is believed to be so immense that several kingdoms during the past millennia have owed their greatness to Her beneficence. Many thousands of pilgrims from all over India visit Her temple for Her darshan every year.

Most Gramadevatas are feminine--associated with the Earth, fertility, healing and protection. Their names often reflect their association with the Mother Goddess: they are usually prefixed or suffixed with Ma, Mata, Matrika or Amman (each a regional translation of "mother"), Ben or Bai (sister) or Rani (queen). Sometimes their regional identities have been merged with that of a greater pan-Indian Deity, such as Durga or Mari.

For example, the Gramadevata of many southern Indian communities is Mariamman, while seven temples to the Goddess Durga Ma surround and guard the royal city of Udaipur. According to Hindu numerology, seven is particularly auspicious. Seven Mothers (Saptamatrika) are believed to guard many towns throughout the subcontinent, each Mother a specific aspect of the great Divine who may be beseeched in times of particular need. Together They are inseparable from the community that They incorporate. Their images may be delicately carved to delineate the various attributes of the individual Goddesses, but most often They are represented simply by a row of seven sacred stones placed beneath an ancient tree.

Shrines

Although Gramadevatas are indivisible from Their communities, each must have a focal point, a specific place or object on which to direct attention. The devasthana, or shrine, of a Gramadevata is usually associated with an important natural feature: a hill, a boulder, a stream or pond, a tree or grove of trees. Trees are by far the most common: there are hundreds of thousands of sacred trees being worshiped constantly in India. Most are ancient, venerated as Gramadevatas for untold centuries in the same way that the pipal tree (Ficus religiosa, a kind of banyan) is worshiped by Lalubhai and his family in the story on page 56.

The appearance of these tree sanctuaries is as varied as the communities themselves: sometimes there are several trees together, or a single tree with a large platform built around it, or one marked with flags and banners, or one with its trunk dressed like the Goddess Herself. The devasthana may be in the center of the village or in the fields beyond the farthest house. When the tree dies, the spot remains sacred. It is believed to be vibrant with the energies of innumerable pujas

and will usually continue to be a focus of community worship, most often with a platform or building constructed where the tree stood.

The shrines in brahmana villages or those with brahmana occupants are usually overseen by brahmana priests. Pujas that take place in devasthanas in those many communities without brahmana occupants are often facilitated by non-brahmana priests, often because the community simply may not be able to afford to hire a brahmana. Conversely, a single brahmana in a village might feel isolated and therefore not want to move there.

The position of priest may be hereditary, usually given to a person of a menial caste whose family has conducted the pujas at a devasthana for untold generations. In some villages, however, inhabitants share responsibility for the shrine and appoint respected citizens to conduct worship, like the pujari in Mataji's shrine. Many rituals that take place in a devasthana are conducted by individual devotees without an intermediary. The contact is direct between devotee and Deity.

Gramadevatas

Occasionally the spirit of community, the Gramadevata, may be transformed into that of another, greater Deity. For example, the essence of the tiny Orissan village of Padmapoda is viewed as the Goddess Gelubai, a local Thakurani, or benign form of the Divine Feminine honored within a sacred tree. Gelubai is believed to protect and nurture every aspect of existence within Padmapoda's boundaries. At times of great need, however, when an individual, a family, or the entire village requires the aid of Shakti (the dynamic power of the Great Goddess), then a special puja is enacted in which the identity of Gelubai is subsumed into that of the Goddess Chandi. Perhaps someone is particularly ill and is unable to be cured by doctors, or perhaps the village is suffering a drought that endangers its crops and livelihood. In these and other dire cases a special brahmana priest will be hired to perform the puja.

Gelubai is first bathed, dressed and adorned, as She is every day, and Her usual puja is conducted. Next, an area is cleaned on the platform in front of the tree; a sacred diagram is drawn with special powders, and a fire is laid with sticks of wood. Then the flames are made to flare by being anointed with ghee, during which time the priest sings the names and attributes of the Goddess Chandi. As he extols Her, he places a coconut in the flames and invites the Goddess to pour Her divine energy into the tree, thereby transforming its essence from that of the village into the

universal power of the Absolute.

As the coconut heats, the milk within it boils, causing it to burst, which signals the moment when the transformation is complete. Chandi in all Her strength is then present within the village. Her devotees may have direct darshan with Her. They believe that whatever they pray for will happen, and that by this ritual miracles do occur. The sick person will be healed or the drought ended. Once the puja is complete and the invocations made, Chandi is reverentially thanked and invited to leave the site. The tree returns once more to Gelubai as the village returns to its peaceful farming existence.

Although the majority of Indian communities worship feminine Gramadevatas, many communities envision these Deities as masculine. In some regions it is common to worship a local form of Rama or Hanuman as Gramadevata. In these cases indigenous legends usually involve the Deity's interaction with local sites and historical characters that are unique variations of the more common mythology. Many villages refer simply to their God as Baba or Appan (two words for father) or an appellation that incorporates one of these names. Just as Mataji is considered the mother of Lalubhai's village, in other communities Deities are visualized as judicious and powerful fathers who protect their families from danger.

In the eastern part of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, many towns and villages have two Gramadevatas--one masculine, the other feminine--each housed in Its own tree shrine. The local names of these Gods and Goddesses are as varied as their communities, although the generic name for the God is either Baba or Di-Baba, while the Goddess is called Kali-Ma. Both are considered tutelary Deities: they protect their devotees from adversity. Villagers may pray to either or both, depending on inclination and need. An outsider would have difficulty ascertaining the difference between the two tree shrines that honor the God and Goddess, except when terracotta offerings have been made. When devotees request the aid of Di-Baba, it is customary to promise to give Him a terracotta horse when their prayers are answered. If a boon is received, the worshiper will commission this sculpture to be made by a local potter. On a day considered auspicious to the God, the horse will be placed in His devasthana, along with gifts of flowers and food.

Pujas to Kali-Ma are more popular than those to Di-Baba. Kali-Ma is viewed locally as the Mother Goddess and is petitioned for aid when any kind of problem strikes the family. Her followers may come from any Hindu sect. Her pujas are considered

particularly effective in combating agricultural calamities, family crises, civic disputes, infertility and disease. Many believe Her to be both the cause and the cure of smallpox, cholera and measles. When struck with one of these diseases, a person is said to be inhabited by Kali-Ma. Part of the cure is to worship and honor the Goddess within.

Often the worshiper will promise that if the Goddess answers his or her prayers, then terracotta elephants will be given to Her. These elephants are believed to become real animals in the spirit world the instant they are placed in Her shrine, and many believe that Kali-Ma rides them in Her nightly battles against evil. Once the elephants have been given and transformed by the Goddess, they no longer have any value. They, like the horses given to Di-Baba, remain beneath the tree to disintegrate with the weather, their sole purpose fulfilled.

Terracotta gifts are placed in the shrines of Gramadevatas throughout India. Most often made on commission by local potters, they are easily affordable, even in a country where the overall per capita income is particularly low. Their form and the style of production vary according to local tradition. Many are simple stick figures made of dowels of clay, others are sculpted of elements thrown on the wheel, while still others are made by coil or slab techniques, or mass-produced in molds. They range in size from just inches high to over sixteen feet, the largest terracottas known in the history of mankind. Almost all are gifts to local Gramadevatas in grateful response to the Deities' beneficence. Each, even the most elaborate, is ephemeral: its value is in the giving. It represents a personal commitment between the devotee and his or her Deity, the essence of Hindu reciprocity.

Considering that each Hindu community honors its own individual Gramadevata, it is no wonder that India is said to contain a million and one Gods and Goddesses. The present census lists more than 630,000 villages, not counting the numerous towns and cities. In its entirety, the Hindu pantheon is overwhelming, inconceivable. Its relevance lies in its approachability, not its vastness. Each Hindu has a vital sense of belonging. Each has an Ishtadevata, the Deity of personal choice; a Kuladevata, the Deity of family and household; and a Gramadevata, the Deity of community. An individual's life is entwined in recognizing and honoring these relationships, in defining the self and one's interconnectedness to all other living beings. In a world where concepts and values are constantly challenged, the underlying purpose of all the numerous rituals and pujas of every day and season is to allow the Hindu to meet God, an experience that brings with it a sense of clarity, balance and belonging.

Honoring the Goddess

Although the light is less intense than earlier, the air is still hot and dusty. After spending the entire day at the back-breaking toil of picking cotton, Lalubhai and his wife, Meeraben, have just come home. They tiredly greet their four small children, the youngest still in the arms of his toothless grandmother. As they sip cups of milky tea and munch thick, sugary biscuits, they listen to the stories of the children's adventures while their parents were at work. Then it is time to get ready to go to the shrine.

Meeraben retires to the walled washroom to clean off the day's dust and to change into her brightest red sari, tie-dyed in yellow and green. She puts on her best jewelry: large silver anklets and bracelets, several rings, long earrings studded with semi-precious stones and a thick silver necklace. Lalubhai bathes right there in the courtyard, stripped down to his underwear, splashing water over himself and lathering profusely before rinsing clean. He wraps a lungi (sarong) around his waist and legs in order to discreetly change into clean pajamas surmounted by a fresh khadi kurta (handspun cotton tunic). He then takes a five-yard length of fine cotton cloth, dyed in a rainbow of bold colors, and wraps it around and around his head to create an elegant turban. His only jewelry are two gold and zircon studs in his ears, a silver amulet around his neck and his watch. Lalubhai's mother had washed and dressed the children before their parents reached home. Then, with the children's eight cousins, two uncles, three aunts and grandmother, the family is ready to leave the house. All are dressed in their finery, and the mood is one of gaiety and anticipation.

As they walk down the street through the village of similar tiled-roof mud houses, they are joined by members of other families. It is Friday, the most auspicious day on which to worship Mataji, the Deity that is the community. Her pujas may take place at any time during the day, and some families were at Her shrine as early as sunrise. Lalubhai's family prefer to approach Her in the evening, when their duties are done and they can devote their entire minds to Her service. On the outskirts of the village, in the fields beyond the last house, is an ancient pipal tree. Its main trunk is over nine feet in diameter, and its lateral roots have grown into smaller trunks; the entire tree has a radius of a medium-sized house. Between the gnarly roots of the central trunk is a huge standing stone covered with orange-red vermilion. These, the tree and the stone, are Mataji, the Goddess who protects the village and provides for its welfare. No one knows how long She has been worshiped in this spot--quite possibly for a thousand years or more, probably since the first people settled the village.

No brahmanas live in this community, only farmers like Lalubhai and his family, craftsmen, a few merchants and some harijans (those in such occupations as cleaning sewers and disposing of the dead). The village is poor and has no money to hire a full-time priest. Instead, various families volunteer to take care of the shrine, sweeping around the tree every morning and placing fresh flowers on the rocks at its base. One of the village elders serves as the pujari (one who facilitates the pujas) each Friday and at the annual festival of the Goddess. Lalubhai, as the family's oldest male, carries a flat basket filled with freshly made sticky sweets, a small mound of white sugar lumps, some flowers just picked from alongside the village reservoir, a few cubes of camphor, and sticks of incense. Meeraben holds a deeper basket of fluffy cotton straight from their field. In its center is a simply sculpted clay horse, a gift to the Goddess in gratitude for this year's bountiful harvest.

Lalubhai hands all the offerings to the old pujari, who places the cotton in a growing pile to one side and the terracotta horse just to the right of the red stone. He puts some of the flowers on the horse and the rest among those that already surround the stone. He puts the incense and camphor into a large brass arati tray and the basket of sweets and sugar with others near the tree's roots.

Almost one hundred villagers have assembled as the sun begins to set. The pujari lights the incense and waves it in front of the stone and around the roots before pushing the sticks into a hole in the ground at their base. He then leads the group in prayers to the Goddess, beginning with songs praising Her name: "Om Mata, Mataji, Om Mata, Mataji." This is followed by a prayer: "You are the True One, the Auspicious, the Beautiful, the Purest Form of all the Gods. You are our Mother [Mataji]: you have given us our lives; you are with us now; you give us our future. You are the Protector: you keep us safe. You destroy evil and you bring us health. We sing your names, we sing your praises. You are our Mother [Mataji]. We are your children."

As they sing, Lalubhai and Meeraben concentrate on the magnificence of the Goddess, on the prosperity that they have received through Her bounty: healthy children, a good, strong family, a large new harvest of cotton and with it the promise of enough to live on throughout the coming year. They focus their thoughts on their gratitude for their community and for the balance in their lives within it. In their prayers they experience a sense of oneness, a direct link to the Goddess and to the world around them: they have darshan with Mataji.

The day is darkening, and the old pujari lights several clay lamps filled with oil. He uses one of these lamps to ignite the camphor mounded on the arati tray, which he then holds up in front of the tree while several others strike the clappers of the bells that hang from the tree's branches. The noise is almost deafening as all the devotees again sing out: "Om Mata, Mataji, Om Mata, Mataji. . . "

Meeraben, Lalubhai, his mother, his brothers and their wives usher their children up to the arati and all hold their hands above the cool flame before raising their fingers to their closed eyelids. The puja is complete. The newly blessed sweets are returned to the family members, who begin to eat them immediately. The cotton will be given to a local weaver to make into cloth to dress the roots of the sacred tree. The horse remains where it was placed, its spirit believed to be magically transformed into a real horse for the Goddess's use in the heavens. Gradually it will crumble and be replaced by others given to the Goddess in return for answered prayers.

Lalubhai and his family join their neighbors on their walk back along the shadow-enfolded road to the village. Someone begins to hum a popular film tune, and others join in. Soon the whole group is singing the familiar words, their feelings in harmony through having participated together in the weekly ritual for Mataji. In honoring the village Goddess they have also honored their community, their occupations and themselves. They feel refreshed and complete, ready to go home for dinner and bed, but also ready to begin the next week of demanding activities.

How India Enriched My Life

From the preface of meeting God: author Stephen Huyler explains how he fell in love with India, her people and their Hindu faith

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 had been taken to see the sacred tree that embodies the local Goddess, Gelubai, the Deity of the community. This new experience was an unprecedented honor: being allowed to witness the ceremony of invocation in which the dynamic power of the supreme Goddess Chandi was requested to subsume and transform that of the local Deity. It was a very special ritual, enacted on rare occasions to implore the aid of the Goddess in

overcoming a difficult domestic problem. My friend Babu Mohapatra, understanding my wish for insights into Hinduism as preparation for writing my book, Meeting God, had arranged this special puja.

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 and 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 on objectivity. I might feel empathy toward a particular subject or situation, but as a scholar I tried to distance myself to observe and take note.

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 vibrating throughout the area surrounding the sacred tree. It was a type of pulsating energy, the strength of which I had never before sensed in my life. 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. By being fully present and receptive to an experience so different from anything that I had been raised to understand, my personal and professional life was changed. I was transformed.

My life has been filled with abundance. I arrived in India on my twentieth birthday to spend the next seven months living in homes throughout the Indian subcontinent. It was a seminal experience that provided the basis for my next twenty-eight years of field research.

I have always found the Indian people to be remarkably hospitable, opening their hearts and their lives to me with generous candor. By profession I have conducted a cross-cultural survey of the material culture of rural India for years, crisscrossing the country in pursuit of the comprehension and documentation of Indian folk arts and crafts. People have always invited me into their homes, to witness and share in their private lives and feelings. From the beginning I have been in awe of the innumerable household rituals I have been privileged to observe. 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.

My research and photography of Indian creativity enabled me to focus on the material world, to learn to understand Indian culture through the objects it produced. But as all crafts in India are believed to have a spiritual content and purpose, my awareness and understanding of Hinduism grew as my work evolved. Two of my previous books have dealt with sacred arts. Meeting God, which I published in 1999, had its direct genesis in an exhibition I proposed and co-curated at the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery entitled "Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion." Sacred Hindu objects, drawn largely from the private collection of Paul Walter, were displayed as they were originally meant to be seen: not primarily as works of art (although many are indeed beautiful pieces) but dressed, adorned and installed in shrines.

The exhibition, which opened in 1996 and ran until 2000, attempted to inform visitors of many of the previously misunderstood aspects of this major religion. The gathering of materials and writing of the text for the show (descriptive panels and labels) was the most difficult task I have ever undertaken. It required a simple and yet enticing synthesis of what is perhaps the most complicated and misunderstood group of religions in the world (collectively called Hinduism). The experience of working on that permanent exhibition inspired the traveling exhibition and this book.

I spent five years gathering material in India for these three purposes. During that period, my life was deeply enriched. From that first experience of participating in the worship of the Goddess Chandi in the sacred tree in Orissa, my perceptiveness continued to grow immeasurably. Now when I am invited to attend a sacred ceremony, I no longer withhold myself in critical appraisal. I am fully present with all of my senses to absorb the ritual, to feel the full experience. I realize now that my earlier distance was merely the consequence of my own limitations.

The many Indians with whom I have interacted have always invited my full participation. For years I held myself apart. My Western heritage and my unconscious miscomprehension of image worship blinded me from deeper understanding. Today I believe that I can still retain a grounding in and deep respect for my American Christian background while being receptive to the many facets of Hindu spirituality. 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. We often base our views of the subcontinent on sensationalized media reports that focus on India's inequalities, injustices and eccentricities, without attempting to portray her strengths. As in most societies, great inequities exist and must be improved, but it is inappropriate to believe that these problems define the country and her people. Many of the negative conditions in India are indeed deplorable (overpopulation, social and economic disparity, and environmental pollution, among others); but it is essential to also recognize India's vitality, her statistics of positive change, and her remarkable agricultural, economic and social improvements since Independence. Projections assert that India will be a leading world power within the first few decades of the twenty-first century.

It is time that we in the West begin to reeducate ourselves and reconsider our values. 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, the world's third largest religion, accounting for one in every six human beings, 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, and it affects every aspect of every day of most Hindu Indians.

For the average Hindu, the Divine is personal and approachable. The most common word describing worship is darshan, literally translated as "seeing and being seen by God." My own rich experiences in India during the past three decades have led me to a deep understanding of this process of "meeting God." In writing Meeting God, I attempted to convey the transformative intensity of worship in India as it evokes the heart as well as the mind, and as it involves the active use of all the senses. Although the work is based on field research and scholarship, I chose to focus my descriptions of daily and seasonal devotions more upon the way they

impact individual Hindu devotees than upon scriptural or textual resources.

Libraries are filled with books that richly describe the Hindu religious canon, but there are few that attempt to give a sense of the many ways that this religion permeates the daily lives of the people of India. Hinduism demands the active participation of all the senses.

I purposely simplified and condensed an extremely complex and diverse religion in order to clearly convey its commonalities. In doing so I hoped not to offend by generalizations but to encourage the reader to delve further into Hinduism and the cultures of India. Meeting God is intended to portray forms of spirituality that have distinctly evolved in the Indian subcontinent but that nevertheless may resonate in the lives of those of us living in other countries. Hinduism is a religion of strength, vitality, innovation, and balance. By opening our hearts and minds to its messages, we can enrich our own lives.