VISITING A HINDU TEMPLE; A BEGINNER'S GUIDE
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The Inner Puja

Hindu temples are built to worship God and Gods: God, who is the one Supreme Being; and Gods, who are individual divine beings, such as Lord Ganesha or Lord Muruga, created by the Supreme God to perform specific duties in the cosmic evolution. God and the Gods are real beings; they are not mere symbols or figments of imagination. They live in the Third World, the most refined and subtle plane of existence. This Third World is deep within the Second World or astral plane, the home of the devas, the "beings of light." Just as we are souls, so are the devas souls: some are between physical births; others are so advanced in their evolution that they no longer incarnate. This Second World is, in turn, within our First World, the physical universe. These three worlds are the training ground for the soul on its way to complete merger with God, its Creator. The soul is never without divine help during this evolution, and the Hindu temple, the magical meeting place of the three worlds, is a place to receive special help. If you could view the temple from the inner worlds, you would see a brilliant ray coming from the Third World right into the temple on the physical plane. This ray allows communication similar to a two-way TV link. The Hindu priest opens this link by doing puja worship to temporarily intensify the power of the temple. This doesn't make the priest a spiritual leader or teacher. He does not stand between you and God; he is more like a TV technician who tunes the equipment for you. When the puja is done with loving devotion, the ray becomes strong and inner doors open from God's world to ours; the devas hover around and through the physical temple and great blessings pour out to the devotees.

Let's Go to The Temple!

You will want to look and feel your best when you go to visit the temple, God's home. Prepare yourself by bathing and putting on clean clothing. Traditional dress is best - saris or long dresses for ladies; long dresses for girls, vethis (dhotis) for

men and boys. But any nice, modest clothing suitable for sitting on the floor is OK. Prepare your mind, too, by thinking about God in anticipation of your visit. Bring a gift for the temple, such as fruits and flowers. Remove your shoes before entering the temple. Greet the deities one after the other at their shrines, starting with Ganesha, by pressing your hands together in namaskara and offering each a flower or fruit. Feel the sannidhya - the overwhelming divine presence of God in the temple.

The Outer Puja

Conducted by a trained priest called a pujari, a Hindu worship service or puja is similar to a grand reception for a king. Pujas can last from ten minutes to several hours, but all follow one basic pattern. First, the pujari purifies the atmosphere and blesses the sacred objects used in the puja. He chants in Sanskrit the time, place and purpose of this particular puja, as well as the God being invoked. He requests God to come and be in the image. Chanting Sanskrit mantrams and hymns from the ancient Vedas, the pujari offers rice, oil lights, incense, vibuthi, water, kumkum, turmeric, flowers and food to the Deity. Sometimes milk, rosewater, sandalwood paste and yogurt are poured over the Deity in a ritual bath called abhishekam. After an abhishekam, the sanctum curtains are closed for 10 to 30 minutes while the Deity is dressed in new clothes and beautifully decorated with flowers. At this point, you may sing devotional songs, if inspired. After the curtain is opened, flowers are offered by the priest during the chanting of 108 names of the God. Next, at the high point of the puja, a large sacred lamp is waved before the Deity and the temple bells are rung loudly as God sends His power through the holy image of Himself. When the sacred lamp is lowered, everyone prostrates: men flat on the floor, face down, arms outstretched in front; women by kneeling and touching their head to the floor, hands together, palms down, in front of their head. The burning lamp is then carried out to the worshippers who often leave a donation on the tray (or later in the temple hundi or offering box). Finally, the vibhuti, holy water, sandalwood paste, kumkum, fruit and flowers are passed out. Afterwards you may sit in quiet meditation.

Temple Manners

Be respectful of God and the Gods at all times. Bring your problems, your wishes or your sorrows but leave improper manners outside as you enter this holy sanctuary. Never enter one of the shrines or touch the deities; never sit with your

feet pointing toward the deities, the guru or another person. Hugging and other demonstrations of affection are out of place. Aside from these few restrictions, be yourself and worship as you wish to, for the temple is the place to work with your problems, not to pretend you don't have any. Meditation is common, but emotion is not out of place. You can be lost in the joy of worshipping God, suffering the sorrow of a great personal loss or celebrating a Hindu samskara. God will receive your devotion, however you offer it.

SACRAMENTS

Taking the Sacred Flame

The burning lamp which has just been used at the high point of the puja to worship God is passed among the devotees to allow you to "take the flame" by quickly passing your hands over it. This is a very important part of the puja, for God and the devas can see and bless you through this flame as it lights up your face. Sometimes, you too can glimpse into their world. Men line up on the right and women on the left to receive the flame. When the priest comes to you with the lamp, hold your hands a few inches apart with your palms down. Reach out and quickly pass both hands over the flame. Then bring your hands back, turn your palms toward your face and touch your eyes with your finger tips. Do this three times. Parents can do this for children until they learn how.

Vibhuti & Holy Water

The next item passed out is vibhuti or Holy Ash. This is made by burning dried cow dung cakes into a pure whitish ash. It is a symbol of the purity we can attain by burning the "three bonds" - ego, ignorance and bad karma - to reveal the soul's natural goodness. The priest will put a pinch of vibhuti into your right palm. (Take all offerings with your right hand - it is an insult to receive something in the left). Put the vibhuti into your left palm, then rub the first three fingers of your right hand in it to pick up some, and finally draw three broad lines across your forehead with the three fingers. This represents the conquest of the three bonds. Next, a small spoonful of blessed Holy Water or tirtham is given into your cupped right hand, which you then drink carefully.

Sandalwood & Kumkum

Chandanam or sandalwood paste is a traditional precious substance, valued for its wonderful scent. A small dab is placed in your hand, which you transfer to your left palm with a wiping motion. Dip your right-hand ring finger into the paste and apply a small dot over your third eye. Rub your hands together to spread any left-over paste onto both palms. Kumkum, a red powder, is next. Moisten your third finger with the leftover sandalwood paste. Then put your finger into the kumkum container which the priest will hold for you. Never moisten your finger with saliva. Apply the kumkum on top of the sandalwood. The three stripes of vibhuti and the sandalwood/kumkum dot on the forehead identify the worshipper as a devotee of God Siva.

SPECIAL SERVICES

Burning Prayers

A prayer written on a piece of paper and burned in a homa or sacred fire will astrally appear in the Second World where the Gods and devas can read it. To accomplish this magical process, you need to write out a full description of your request, confession or problem. You can ask for help for all kinds of things - spiritual advancement, employment, personal problems, even finding lost items. The devas will help within the limits of your personal karma and understanding. Give the note to the priest to burn (he will not read it). Your response will come in about three days, often in a subtle way, such as a sudden inspiration, an unexpected opportunity or a casual suggestion. No response means something was not right, so you should rethink your request and ask again.

Archana

An archana is a special short puja done by the priest for an individual, usually after the main puja. It is a way of asking God for something important, such as success in school or business, or to express thanks for good fortune. Inform the priest you want an archana, and he will tell you when it can be done and the cost. You should

bring fruit and flowers, as well as the money, on an offering tray (which can also have a coconut, incense, kumkum, camphor and sandlewood paste). As you stand in front of the Deity's shrine, the priest will ask your name, gotra (family lineage), and birthstar (or sign). During the short puja you can mentally pray to God for your special needs. Finally, the priest will return part of your blessed offerings to you which you may then take home.

Samskaras

A central part of every Hindu's life, samskaras are the rites of passage for an individual. Examples are the name-giving and marriage ceremonies. You can arrange for a samskara with the temple priest. There is a charge for these special, often elaborate, ceremonies which usually include a puja and homa or fire ceremony. The priest will set an auspicious time, explain how to prepare and what to bring, as well as what you do during the ceremony. The principal samskaras offered by most temples are: marriage; funerals; name-giving (done at 40 days for a child, or anytime for an adult entering Hinduism); first solid food (1 year old); ear-piercing (1 year old); head shaving (3 years old); first learning (4 years old); and beginning of formal student life (8 years old).

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