

[When Religion Used to Be Lots of Fun](#)

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When Religion Used to Be Lots of Fun

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Growing up in India, I found that pleasure and pilgrimage, religious rituals and daily life were intricately intertwined. My earliest memories are of sitting with the aged family cook hearing not Grimm's Fairy Tales but Ramayana and Mahabharata. Listening spellbound to adventures of demons and devatas, we absorbed values of right and wrong, good and evil. Again, religion was always associated with joy and pleasure, never moralistic teaching. Every weekend we were taken to the beautiful sandstone Birla Mandir - cold marble below bare feet, the softness of marigolds and rose petals in our hands, the smiling faces of Krishna, Siva and Vishnu, the harmonium and symbols and the sheer faith of hundreds of devotees. All this mixes in my memory with the gigantic demon caves with gaping mouths and massive stone elephants. There were joyrides on the stone tiger, towers to climb, plastic toys, holy pictures and lockets to buy. I think of that adventure-filled temple complex when I see Disneyworld where there is no added spiritual dimension.

At lunch time, my mother would say a silent prayer and set aside a portion to be fed to the cows. If a hungry man came to the door at mealtime, he was fed and given a few coins. On Mondays, the women of the house would fast and do a special puja, after which there would be prasadam and a special meal. We children watched and emulated.

The festival of Dusshera meant an annual visit to the Ramlila grounds in Old Delhi where a gigantic effigy of the ten-headed Ravana, filled with dynamite, stood ready for a fiery end. As the demon king disappeared in orange flames, we saw first-hand the triumph of good over evil. Another highlight was the Ramlila performances. We sat in the front row, mesmerized by battles and golden deer and flying monkeys. Hoodwinked by their adventure and humor, we assimilated important ethical truths - every son should be as dutiful as Sri Rama, every wife as loyal as Sita and every brother as devoted as Lakshmana - and glimpsed Utopia.

Summer vacations were always intertwined with pilgrimages. Leaving the dust and heat of Delhi behind, our month long stay in the cool hills of Mussoorie ended with stopovers in Mathura, Rishikesh and Haridwar, and a dip in the holy Ganges. Amazingly, those childhood visits to Haridwar with closeness of family are still very much alive. Nothing quite compares with the mangos wrapped in muslin and lowered into the Ganges. Chilled and intoxicatingly sweet, they were eaten after our dip in the Ganges. We would then wander the winding bazaars, purchasing baubles, bangles, maybe a miniature Bhagavad Gita. At eight o'clock, as darkness fell, we, parents and children, would light the divas on the banana leaf floats laden with flower. Then, each saying a special prayer, we would set our floats on the shimmering water. As conch shells sounded, hundreds of flickering floats danced and bobbed on the holy Ganges.

All this I find missing in our life abroad. Here our daily life has become as sanitized of religion as a hospital room. Often religion becomes a chore and we remember God only when we are in pain. But it need not be that way - there are beautiful temples all over the US which can be worked into the vacation scenario or even better, a pilgrimage to India.

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