

## [Do Teens Like Temples?](#)

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### TESTIMONY

## Do Teens Like Temples?

A survey of my friends shows that most young Hindus enjoy the temple's serene atmosphere

ramya gopal

"Shuklam baradharam vishnum" echoes the Saturday morning chanting through the body of the temple where the priest sits next to a statue of Vishnu and Lakshmi. My mom and I read a sign that says, "Please be quiet inside, " and open the doors. The red-and-blue-carpeted floor is empty, save a few early-rising devotees. The sunlight cascades downwards from skylights, gently lighting the statues. The murtis are set up on the back of the stage in the main prayer room. The largest statues are those of Vishnu and Lakshmi, with smaller murtis of Hanuman, Durga, Siva, Saraswati and many others. Each murti is decorated with a garland, and all have a beautiful array of fruits and flowers spread before them. I walk up to the stage and ring a bell hanging from the dome three times, the sound resonating, breaking the silence. People beside me bow down in namaskara and then apply kumkum to their foreheads from a steel bowl in front of the fruit offerings. A priest sits on the side, and each devotee comes up for prasadam. My mother and I walk down from the stage and sit on the carpet, simply gazing at the murtis in a peaceful moment of darshan or meditation. This is how I spend every Saturday morning.

Our weekly trips to the temple have been a ritual for as long as I can remember. These visits, coupled with weekly religion classes, have always helped me expand my circle of Hindu friends. The prevailing notion held by many parents is that first generation Hindu teenagers, like me, have no interest in their religion and don't enjoy visiting the temple for prayer, festivals and other activities. To the contrary, it is the temple's atmosphere that attracts most of us. My friend, 14-year-old Nikiti Desai, shared, "The atmosphere feels very holy, kind of sacred. If you do something wrong, God is watching, but it's still very peaceful." It is the peaceful atmosphere of

the temple that breaks our busy days in school and allows us to connect with our religion and faith. Once I brought my Jewish friend to the temple, and she admired the openness of the temple, remarking, "Anyone can walk in at any time. It's nice." The temple is one of the few ways young teens can connect with not only our religion, but also with our Indian culture, because it isn't just a place of worship.

The murtis are another point of interest for temple teens. Even those who don't particularly like the atmosphere agree that the murtis are beautiful. "All temples have basically the same atmosphere to them, but I particularly like the temples in India. Everything is just so beautiful," offered 16-year-old Kriti Samayamantri.

However, not every Hindu teen goes to the temple. A friend who wishes to remain anonymous believes that "The temple feels too much like church, like a congregation of people praying." It is ironic that the temple, which is intended to promote spiritual equality, makes some people feel uncomfortable, especially when a member of the family stands out because he is disabled. "I think that it should be more private," she said, "I just don't like the temple. There are too many people gossiping." Sixteen-year-old Avinash Danashekar of Islen, New Jersey, confessed the reason he doesn't go to the temple: "My parents are always busy, so we rarely go."

Unfortunately, work commitments don't always allow parents to take their children to the temple, and that not only deprives them of the experience of the temple's serene atmosphere, but also the opportunity to connect with other Hindus. While the temple does attract sincere devotees who meet and enjoy spending time with each other, it can often promote division between people of different nationalities and even regions of India. The few Hindus that are not Indian usually are not as welcome by the priest and are sometimes clearly excluded from the patches of brown. Depending on the festival being celebrated, each language- or state-based group isolates itself from the others. This is not the type of atmosphere that temples should continue to foster, and Hinduism would be put in a better light if every house of God attempted to reach out to all Hindus, not only Indians.

Like churches and synagogues, the Hindu temple has become more than just a place to revere the Gods and pray. The Bharatiya temple in Troy, Michigan, where I live, also houses a library brimming with books on Hinduism, Indian languages and religious DVDs and tapes like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. However, the most-used part of the temple is downstairs: a cultural hall with a stage and a cafeteria. The hall hosts dance classes, pujas, religion classes and shows such as

Basanth Bahar, a cultural program to welcome spring. Last November, the temple hosted Ras Garba, a Gujarati dance celebration of Navaratri. Temple activities such as these make it even more fun and interesting for teenagers.

Of all the friends I surveyed, none of them was forced to come to the temple or said that he or she hated anything specific about it. Sixteen-year-old Anu Joshi commented, "I want to continue visiting temples even after I go to college, because I like going." Fifteen-year-old Sneha Inguva noted, "It's important to have some religion in your life. I probably would go every weekend or at least twice a month." These voices reflect the general opinion of most of my friends, a fact that may surprise some.

Among teenage Hindu devotees, there are mixed feelings toward the temple. It has brought me closer to my religion and culture, while it has alienated others. In the growing Hindu diaspora, we need to learn to accept our differences and allow our temples to grow to embrace everyone in the community.

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Ramya Gopal, 16, plays the violin in a community orchestra, studies classical Indian music and dance and is a senior at the International Academy.