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Puja

At home or in the temple, Hindus revere and adore the Divine through distinctive rites. Too many misconstrue the worship of sacred images, and few understand the mystical purpose of puja. Here are some insights into tradition.

What Is the Inner Importance of Puja?

The traditional rite of worship, called puja, is a sanctified act of the highest importance for the Hindu. It is the invoking of God Siva and the Gods and the heartfelt expression of our love, devotion and surrender. Aum.

Puja is a ceremony in which the ringing of bells, passing of flames, presenting of offerings and chanting invoke the devas and Mahadevas, who then come to bless and help us. Puja is our holy communion, full of wonder and tender affections. It is that part of our day which we share most closely and consciously with our beloved Deity; and thus it is for Saivites the axis of religious life. Our worship through puja, outlined in the Saiva Agamas, may be an expression of festive celebration of important events in life, of adoration and thanksgiving, penance and confession, prayerful supplication and requests, or contemplation at the deepest levels of superconsciousness. Puja may be conducted on highly auspicious days in a most elaborate, orthodox and strict manner by the temple pujaris, or it may be offered in the simplest form each morning and evening in the home shrine by any devotee. The Vedas proclaim, "Sacrifice resembles a loom with threads extended this way and that, composed of innumerable rituals. Behold now the fathers weaving the fabric; seated on the outstretched loom. `Lengthwise! Crosswise!' they cry." Aum.

What Is the Special Rite Called Archana?

Archana is an abbreviated form of temple puja in which the name, birth star and spiritual lineage of a devotee are intoned to the God by the priest to invoke special, individual, family or group blessings and assistance. Aum.

If we wish to receive the Deity's blessing for something special that is happening in our life, we may request an archana. This is arranged and paid for within the temple itself. We give a basket or tray to the priest, or pujari, upon which have been placed certain articles to be offered to the Deity: usually a flower garland, bananas and a coconut (carefully washed and not even breathed upon), holy ash, incense, camphor, rosewater and a contribution for the pujari. The pujari asks for our name, which we tell him aloud, and our nakshatra, or birth star. Then he asks for our gotra-the name of the rishi with which our family is associated. He then intones these, our credentials, before the Deity along with a Sanskrit verse. A brief puja, in which the 108 names of the God are chanted, is then performed specifically on our behalf and special blessings received. At the end, the pujari will return most of the offerings as prasada. The Vedas implore, "By your favors granted enable us, O Lord, once again to leap over the pitfalls that face us. Be a high tower, powerful and broad, for both us and our children. To our people bring well-being and peace." Aum.

What is the Nature of Image Worship?

We worship God Siva and the Gods who by their infinite powers spiritually hover over and indwell the image, or murti, which we revere as their temporary body. We commune with them through the ritual act of puja. Aum.

The stone or metal Deity images are not mere symbols of the Gods; they are the form through which their love, power and blessings flood forth into this world. We may liken this mystery to our ability to communicate with others through the telephone. We do not talk to the telephone; rather we use a telephone as a means of communication with another person who is perhaps thousands of miles away. Without the telephone, we could not converse across such distances; and without the sanctified murti in the temple or shrine we cannot easily commune with the Deity. His vibration and presence can be felt in the image, and He can use the image as a temporary physical-plane body or channel. As we progress in our worship, we begin to adore the image as the Deity's physical body, for we know that He is actually present and conscious in it during puja, aware of our thoughts and feelings and even sensing the pujari's gentle touch on the metal or stone. The

Vedas exclaim, "Come down to us, Rudra, who art in the high mountains. Come and let the light of thy face, free from fear and evil, shine upon us. Come to us with thy love." Aum.

Who Are the Priests of Siva Temples?

Adisaiva priests are the hereditary pujaris, who care for the temple and conduct its varied rites and rituals as humble servants of God. They are trained in the complex arts of worship, generally from a young age. Aum.

Every temple has its own staff of priests. Some temples appoint only one, while others have a large extended family of priests to take care of the many shrines and elaborate festivals. Most are well trained from early childhood in the intricate liturgy. Siva temple pujaris are usually brahmins from the Adisaiva lineage, though in certain temples they are not. These men of God must be fully knowledgeable of the metaphysical and ontological tenets of the religion and learn hundreds of mantras and chants required in the ritual worship. When fully trained, they are duly ordained as Sivacharyas to perform paratha puja in a consecrated Siva temple. Generally, pujaris do not attend to the personal problems of devotees. They are God's servants, tending His temple home and its related duties, never standing between the devotee and God. Officiating priests are almost always married men, while their assistants may be brahmacharis or widowers. The Agamas explain, "Only a well-qualified priest may perform both atmartha puja, worship for one's self, and paratha puja, worship for others. Such an Adisaiva is a Saiva brahmin and a teacher." Aum.

What Does the Pujari Do During Puja?

During the puja, through mantras, mudras and mystical ritual, the priest invokes the Deity. All observances are precisely detailed in the Agamas; every act, every intoned syllable is rich in esoteric meaning. Aum.

The pujari performs strict ablutions and disciplines to prepare himself for his sacred duty. Before the puja, he ritually purifies the atmosphere. As the puja

begins, he meditates on Lord Ganesha, praying that all obstacles may be removed. He then beseeches the God to indwell the image, to accept the prayers of the votaries, and to shower blessings and love on all. Calling the name of the Deity and chanting mantras and hymns from the Vedas and Agamas, the pujari makes offerings of unbroken rice, burning camphor, incense, holy ash, water, red turmeric powder, flowers and food. Sometimes offerings of milk, rosewater, sandalwood paste and yogurt are poured over the murti as an oblation, called abhisheka. Bells are loudly rung, conch shells sounded, and musicians may play the temple drums and woodwinds. The pujari treats the Deity with utmost care, attending to Him as the King of kings. When the puja has ended, the pujari passes the now sanctified offerings to those present. The Vedas state, "Daily the sacrifice is spread. Daily the sacrifice is completed. Daily it unites the worshiper to heaven. Daily by sacrifice to heaven he ascends." Aum.