

[Something's Wrong At Our Temples](#)

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COMMENTARY

## Something's Wrong At Our Temples

Avaricious priests sully sacred places, as does denial of entry to "non-Hindus"

VISWANATH P. KURUP

Temples are the abodes of God, filled with sanctity and peace. The major temples of India are endowed with architectural beauty and splendid brilliance. We marvel at their richness of art and the dramatic depiction of philosophy, thought and tradition. What do all these temples, both major and minor, seasonal and year round, scattered the width and length of the country, represent? Nothing other than the best of our Hindu culture.

The experience one has at temples varies, but mostly it is satisfying to people from all walks of life. Through the years, I visited some of the very famous temples and experienced the splendid beauty of the presiding Gods and Goddesses in these places of unmatched holiness. Although my experiences are diverse and many, I would

like to address in this essay two major concerns which I encountered frequently during these trips.

After a pleasant and rewarding trip to Manasarovar and Mount Kailas in the Himalayas, we continued with our pilgrimage to temples and places in Nepal and India. At Kathmandu we visited Pasupathinath temple and conducted all the designated pujas. From Kathmandu we proceeded to Lumbini, the birth place of Sri Buddha. Some of the members of the group returned to the USA, while the rest of us, including Swami Pranavananda of Vivekananda Kutir, Rameswaram, traveled on to India as planned. We visited Belur Math, home of the Ramakrishna Mission, and the places connected to Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda situated in southern Bengal. We visited the Dakshineswar temple and offered our obeisance there. The temple was extremely crowded, but still there were no problems or obstacles that jeopardized its tranquility and peace.

After spending a week of spiritual feasting, we proceeded to Bhuvaneshwar and Puri to visit and worship at the Lingaraj and Jagannath temples with ardent enthusiasm. But our experience was to be much different. At both temples we were met with ruthless and abusive treatment from the pandas and pujaris. Pandas are hereditary priests who assist pilgrims with

the temple rituals and record the visit in their pilgrim register. Pujaris perform the actual temple ceremonies. Here these pandas and pujaris control everything in and around the temples and cause serious harm to the devotees congregating at the temples. They ruthlessly pressure and abuse visitors for the sake of filling their purses. Although we were ready to pay anything they asked for, still our plight was not different. In front of every temple Deity they demanded huge amounts of money for services we did not want to perform for one reason or other, and, on failing to meet their demands, we were subjected to abusive and profane insults. We could not visualize how such acts of terror could happen in a place of holiness and worship. In these temples we never got any peace of mind, nor could we worship the God with humility. They also used obnoxious language toward Swami Pranavananda and threatened him for aiding us out of their trap. We left both temples with tears in our eyes. What a paradox. Expecting to worship in peace at the abode of the presiding Almighty, what we gained instead was eroding of our faith, nervousness and frustration. The same treatment was repeated when we visited a few of the major temples in Tamil Nadu.

I have been told that this is the universally accepted order in all the major temples of India, including in Kasi and Mathura. I wonder why nobody has raised their little finger about this unacceptable behavior and come

up with a solution for safeguarding pilgrims and devotees and regaining sanctity in these places. Our temples need to be liberated from the diabolical environment created by these perpetrators. The story is different if one goes to a small village temple. There is no huge crowd, no harassment and no pickpockets. By and large, a serene atmosphere still prevails. The authorities of the temples should take action to preserve the culture and sanctity of our temples.

Those who live in the Western world frequently experience another phenomenon which we did not anticipate in the third millennium. In India we do not allow non-Hindus to enter the temples, while the Western churches in America provide all facilities for us to conduct our ritual worship in their institutions. Now that we have a number of temples in the Western world, it is not as common as it was ten or twenty years ago, when we had no places of our own. But still today, our smaller communities use Christian church facilities graciously given for their Ganapati, Lakshmi and Durga festivals on a yearly basis. This, then, is my second point of concern, the insensitive way temples treated foreigners, particularly Westerners, even though most of them are "more Hindu" than any average Hindu by birth. These Westerners have studied the scriptures more thoroughly than the average Hindu of India. Of course, casually and illegally, many temples still discriminate against the harijans and backward classes.

But the boards hanging outside the entrances of Kerala temples legally deny the rights of non-Hindus to enter and worship. They are a shame to the civilized human race as a whole, and particularly to the true Hindu. Who goes to a temple anyway, an atheist or a believer? Until half a century ago the harijans and backward class Hindus, the targets of abuse and discrimination, were not allowed to enter the temple. Now we discriminate against these fellow Hindus by faith instead of birth.

How long will it take us to stop this onslaught of unrighteous, demanding priests and the denial of entry to "non-Hindus" and to bring the Godliness back to our temples all over India?

Viswanath P. Kurup, Ph.D., 66, is professor of pediatrics and medicine at the Medical College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Born in Kerala, he and his wife Indira have three children and six grandchildren. E-mail: [vkurup@mcw.edu](mailto:vkurup@mcw.edu).