

[Puja's Passion](#)

Category : [November 1999](#)

Published by Anonymous on Nov. 02, 1999

WORSHIP

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Book Review: Hindus approach the Gods daily, seeking and receiving divine intervention. In 'Meeting God,' Stephen P. Huyler offers an empathic literary and photographic lens to view the Hindus' relationship with their Deity.

Stephen P. Huyler began as an outsider. "I prided myself on my objectivity," he says in his preface to Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion (280 pages, Yale University Press. ^{us}\$35.00). But he did not linger on the fringes, and Meeting God could never be called an outsider's examination of Hindu worship habits [see My Turn]. Quite the contrary, Huyler reveals private, personal rituals which we would never come to read of or see otherwise. He does this through his artistic world-class photography, but more through his engaging anecdotes and explanations of the philosophy behind the actions of Hindu worship.

Huyler follows the daily worship of families and individuals--in their homes, during visits to temples and at shrines seeking blessings for a miracle. But the bulk of the text is Huyler's adept descriptions of the philosophy, history and

purpose of Indian Hindu icons, shrines and temples and personal ritual observances. It is a vast subject which has never been so thoughtfully presented as it is here. Meeting God serves as an engaging story book, a photo journey through India and, most significantly, a superb overview of the ways and whys of Hindu worship.

The book speaks for itself. In the following excerpt, a family's tragedy is averted by divine intervention.

The news alarmed Kamala. her little granddaughter was so young, so beautiful. She had known from the moment she was born that she would be the pride of the family, that she would succeed in life. And now they had just been told that there was nothing to be done. Little Aditi, only fourteen months old, was dying of this new strain of cholera, and the doctors were at their wits' end. The family had rushed the delirious, feverish baby to the hospital four days before; yet despite all the care of the medical team, the strong medicines, the intravenous and oxygen, her condition had grown steadily worse.

Kamala prayed with all her concentration focused on Siva, saying his name again and again, chanting the mantra she had been given when she had come of age, asking the God for his help in this dire emergency. And then, suddenly, she knew what to do. She pushed through all the other family members: her son Pradeep, his wife, Geeta, her two older sons and their wives. She went directly to the bedside, pulled out the needles and tubes from Aditi's tiny arm, took the oxygen mask from her face, and cradled her in her arms. Geeta cried out in protest, reaching for her daughter as, behind her, the nurse stormed in to stop this action; but Kamala did not relinquish the girl. She firmly told her plan to everyone there. She was taking Aditi to be healed by the Goddess. Parvati would save their child. They were going to the temple at Ochira.

Everyone hurried out of the hospital and down the street toward the bus station. The next bus to Ochira was not for five hours, and they did not have enough money for a taxi. One of the girl's uncles talked a motor rickshaw into taking Kamala, Pradeep, Geeta, the baby and himself. The others would come later by bus. By pooling all

their resources they would just have enough to pay. Even by this transportation it would take almost two hours to reach the temple.

They crammed themselves into the little vehicle and took off. Together they sang the praises of the Goddess, over and over calling out her name. Little Aditi stayed on Kamala's lap the whole time, her mother constantly applying fresh cloths soaked in cool water to her feverish skin. Finally, they pulled up to the temple at Ochira and dismounted from the rickshaw.

Ochira is unique among all Hindu temples. Even though it has been famous throughout the area for centuries for the innumerable miracles that have taken place there, the temple itself is open air. It has the towering gateway common in this southern Indian state of Kerala, and its grounds include a marriage hall and an assembly hall. The large field that constitutes the center of the complex contains two sacred trees and a sacred grove. Local legend states that the trees represent the Absolute Divine, Parabrahman: God without form, unmanifested in any image. It is a

place like Lourdes in France, to which the faithful come to be healed.

Kamala knows right where she is going: directly to the back of the first tree. A threefoot-high cement platform surrounds and contains a peepul and a kadamba tree entwined with long gnarly roots at their base. Small open shrines on both sides are facilitated by non-brahmana priests, who conduct special pujas in the morning and evening and remain throughout the day to receive offerings, give prashad, and advise devotees in the appropriate procedures for approaching Parabrahman. Even though Ochira is maintained as a temple to the unformed Absolute, a wooden image of the Goddess Parvati stands at the rear shrine, installed by a grateful past recipient of healing. Devotees claim that many miracles have occurred here with the aid of the Goddess. It is this image that Kamala saw in her prayers in the hospital. It is here that she has brought her granddaughter to be healed.

First, with the priest's instruction, she pours fresh vermilion and sandalwood powder over the image,

placing coins at Parvati's feet. Then she lowers Aditi to the sand beneath the tree. The baby is still delirious, faintly moaning as she feverishly thrashes her head back and forth. Kamala opens her heart and her mind to the Goddess, loudly calling out her name and vowing to undergo arduous annual fasting and penance if the child is cured. Other women, strangers who have been touched by these desperate prayers, crowd around Geeta to ululate in high-pitched rolling cries intended to keep away death. Pradeep and his brother prostrate themselves on the ground, their hands stretched out toward Parvati. The priest chants with his eyes closed. For several minutes all attention is vibrantly focused on the Goddess, all beseeching Her intervention, all requesting Her aid.

And then Aditi stops twisting her little body and lies still, her breathing regular and her eyes clear. Kamala feels her forehead, loudly proclaims that the fever is gone, and then collapses to the ground, rolling back and forth and chanting: "Amma, Amma, Amma, Amma" ("Mother, Mother, Mother, Mother!"). She is overcome with gratitude to the Goddess. Geeta and Pradeep rush forward

and scoop up the little girl in their arms, tears streaming down their cheeks as they realize that she looks changed, tired and pale but no longer ill. They cry out vows to Parvati to honor her for the rest of their lives.

When the family has recovered, they all sit alongside the tree, each alternately picking up the small girl to stroke and kiss her. They wait for the evening puja to join the hundreds of other devotees in prayers to Parabrahman and the extraordinary sacred power manifest in this place. When the rest of their relatives arrive by bus late that night, they all share in adulation for the miracle that has taken place.

One of the underlying popular tenets of Hinduism is the acceptance of miracles. Most Hindus believe that direct appeal for aid from a deity often results in divine intervention. The Gods and Goddesses are approachable and, when properly beseeched, will change the course of events. Prayers for intercession may be made to any deity, the choice entirely dependent on the beliefs and inclinations of the devotee. Stories in every

neighborhood revolve around ancestors or acquaintances whose sincere devotion resulted in the prevention of misfortune and disaster. Elements of nature such as certain trees or rocks are believed to possess powerful healing energy. Just touching such an object may result in a miracle.

Innumerable examples of such healings exist. For instance, at the Bedla Mataji Temple just outside the city of Udaipur in Rajasthan, as many as twenty-thousand devotees come for healing during the ten-day Navaratri Festival each year. While making a wish to the Goddess Durga, they crawl through a short U-shaped arch of stone and clay believed to be vibrant with sacred energy. If the individual's prayer is answered, he or she will promise to return to crawl seven more times through the arch before giving substantial offerings to the Goddess. Many devotees claim that this action has resulted in miracles. At the roots of the sacred trees in Ochira, described in the beginning of this article, groupings of ancient wooden sculptures represent legs, arms, and complete human figures. Years ago they were placed there to remind Parabrahman of the

specific healing requested. When the miracles occurred, the objects were left behind. Devotees believe that these sculptures are now imbued with sacred healing energy. The afflicted will pick up one that pertains to that part of the body that needs attention and revolve it around the spot, accordingly absorbing divine healing.

In general, healing is believed to come to those who deserve it. Disrespectful or inappropriate behavior (for example, the seeking of self-satisfaction at the expense of one's family or friends) is considered to demean the individual character and to create bad karma. Karma, it may be remembered, is based on the absolute law of cause and effect, of total responsibility for one's actions. Karma is the sum of the entire character, the tally of all the good and bad acts in this life and all previous lives. Social or material inequalities are viewed, in part, as the natural product of past-life karma. Each individual is ultimately accountable for every choice, every action, and even every thought. Selfless dedication to the duties in life, to the responsibilities undertaken by being born into this body, this family and this occupation, are

considered to be a virtue, to create good karma. Countless Hindu treatises, legends and stories extol the virtuous life. Clear-sighted commitment to the fulfillment of duty to family and deity are the highest possible human achievement. Acts of virtue are believed to attract the positive attention and beneficence of the Gods and, when necessary, to clear a path for healing energy.

Yale University Press has made Meeting God their front-running book for the fall '99 season. Another company, Amber Lotus, has produced a stunning year-2000 calendar and twelve attractive greeting cards based upon the book and utilizing Huyler's photographs. Huyler's work is also accessible through an exhibition which will travel the US--at the Houston Museum of Natural Science beginning September 29; then traveling through the end of 2001 and settling in the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

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