Worshipful Ways
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INSIGHT

Worshipful Ways

An overview of the metaphysics of devotion and a beginner's guide to Hindu temple protocol

Hindus go to temples to be in the presence of God. The most devout attend daily, morning and night, while most visit each week. All will go to major festivals, for which each temple has its calendar and special days. Just as one prepares carefully to meet a great statesman and follows proper protocol in his presence, so do devotees prepare to meet God and be in His presence. Though Divinity is everywhere, pervading everything, we become more aware of this in a temple, where the three worlds merge as one. The Third World is the most refined heavenly plane of existence, the realm of God and the Gods. The Second World is the home of the devas (angels). The First World is our physical universe. Temple worship, called puja, is the elaborate mystic science of temporarily lifting the veils between the three worlds so we, the Gods and devas may commune. In this month's Insight, we explore the protocol that all observe in a Hindu temple, where everyone is welcome.

If you've never been to a Hindu temple, be prepared to enter a different world. You may encounter a multitude of emotions and sights. In larger temples you may see a wedding at one

shrine, a new widow weeping to her God nearby, a yogi in silent meditation, a family laughing together and fifty raucous devotees on pilgrimage singing to their Lord with loud fervor--all in the same space, at the same time. It is life, in all it's shades and hues, without judgment.

You will want to look and feel your best when you visit the temple, God's home. Prepare by bathing and dressing in clean clothing. Traditional dress is best--saris, punjabis or long dresses for ladies; punjabis, "half-saris" or long dresses for girls; veshtis (dhotis), or kurta shirts and pants, for men and boys. But any decent, modest clothing suitable for sitting on the floor is acceptable. Before your visit, prepare your mind by thinking about God, as the energy within your body, which comes from Him. Always bring a gift for the temple, such as fruits and flowers. Remove your shoes before entering. Greet the Deities, one after the other, at their shrines, starting with Lord Ganesha, by pressing your hands together in namaskara and offering each a flower or fruit. Feel the sannidhya--the divine presence within the temple.

Bring your problems, wishes or sorrows, but leave improper manners outside. Never enter the shrines or touch the icons; never sit with your feet pointing toward the Deities or another person. Hugging and other demonstrations of affection are out of place, as is worldly talk. Aside from these few restrictions, be yourself and worship as you wish, for the temple is the place to work with your problems, not to pretend you don't have any. Meditation is common, but emotion is not out of place. God will receive your devotion, however you offer it. One need not come during times of formal worship, for Hindu temples are not congregational in the Western sense.

There are two distinctive styles of worship encountered in Hindu temples: North Indian and South Indian. The North Indian style generally focuses on the offering of lamps before the sacred images and icons of the Deities, and bathing of the Sivalinga, accompanied by devotional singing and chants, especially of the famed "arati" song. Even ordinary devotees may conduct this form of worship.

The South Indian style is conducted by an ordained priest called a pujari. This liturgy, or puja, is similar to a grand reception for a king. Pujas can last from ten minutes to several hours. First the pujari purifies the atmosphere and blesses the sacred objects used in the puja. He chants in Sanskrit the time, place and purpose of this particular ceremony, as well as the name of the God being invoked. He beseeches the Deity to come and abide in the sculpted image, then greets the divine guest with Sanskrit chants and hymns from the ancient Vedas. He offers rice, oil lights, incense, holy ash, water, kunkuma, turmeric, flowers and food. Usually milk, rosewater, sandalwood paste and yogurt are poured over the Deity in a ritual bath called abhisheka. After this formal ablution, the sanctum curtains are closed for 10 to 30 minutes while the Deity is dressed and adorned with flowers. At this point, devotees sing devotionals. When the curtain is opened, revealing the Deity's resplendent presence, flowers are offered by the priest during the chanting of 108 or 1,008 names of the God. At the zenith of the puja, a large lamp with five camphor flames is waved before the Deity and the temple bells are rung loudly as God sends His power through the holy image of Himself. When the sacred lamp is lowered, everyone prostrates: men flat on the floor, face down, arms outstretched in front; women by kneeling and touching their head to the floor, hands together, palms down, in front of their head. The

burning lamp is then carried out to the worshipers, who reverently pass their hands three time through the flames and draw the blessings to their eyes three times. Finally, the sacred ash, holy water, sandalwood paste, kunkuma, fruit and flowers are passed out. Afterwards the yogically inclined sit in quiet meditation and absorb the power of the puja.

"Taking" the Sacred Flame

At the high point of the puja, the burning lamp which has just been offered to God is passed among all the devotees. This is a sharing of God's light and blessings, a bathing in His light, a prayer to take that light into ourselves and see the world with eyes awaked to a deeper truth. The Gods and the devas can see you through the sacred flame and send their blessings. Men line up on the right and women on the left to receive the flame. When the priest comes to you with the lamp, hold your hands a few inches apart with your palms down. Reach out and reverently pass both palms over the flame. Then bring your hands back, turn your palms toward your face and touch your eyes with your finger tips. Do this three times. Parents can guide their children's hands until they learn the motion.

Holy Ash and Holy Water

The next item passed out is vibhuti, or holy ash. It is made by burning dried cow dung cakes into a pure whitish ash. It is a symbol of the purity we can attain by burning the "three bonds"--ego, ignorance and karma--to reveal the soul's natural goodness. The priest will place a pinch of ash into your right palm. Take all offerings with your right hand--it is impolite to receive anything with the left hand. Transfer the holy ash into your left palm, then rub the first three fingers of your right hand in it to pick up the ash. Draw three broad lines across

your forehead with the three fingers. This represents the conquest of the three bonds. Repeat to apply all the ash. Next, a small spoonful of holy water, tirtham, is given into your cupped right hand, which you lift up to first your right eye, then the left, then drink.

Sandalwood and Kunkuma

Chandana, or sandalwood paste, is a traditional precious substance, valued for its rareness, sweet scent and cooling properties. With a spoon, the priest will place a small dab in your right hand. Transfer this to your left palm. Then dip your right-hand ring finger into the paste and apply a dot over your third eye. Rub your hands together to spread any leftover paste onto both palms. Kunkuma, a red powder made of turmeric and lime, is next. As the priest approaches, moisten your third finger with the leftover sandalwood paste. Then put your finger into the kunkuma container when he holds it before you. (Never moisten your finger with saliva.) Apply the kunkuma as a dot on top of the sandalwood. The resulting three stripes of ash and a brown-red dot, called bindu, is the sign, tilak, that one is a worshiper of God Siva.

Burning Prayers

Some temples offer the service of burning written prayers. A prayer written on a piece of paper and burned in a homa or sacred fire will astrally appear in the Second World where the Gods and devas can read it. To accomplish this magical process, you need to write out a full description of your prayer, confession or problem. You can ask for help for all kinds of things--spiritual advancement, employment, personal problems, even finding lost items. The devas will help within the limits of your karma. Give the note to the priest at a

temple which provides this service. He will not read it before he burns it. Your response will come in about three days, often in a subtle way, such as a sudden inspiration or unexpected opportunity. If there is no apparent response, then make your request again.

Archana, Special Puja

An archana is a special short puja done by the priest for an individual, usually after the main puja. It is a way of asking God for something important and personal, such as success in school or business, or to express thanks for good fortune. Inform the priest you want an archana, and he will tell you when it can be done and the cost. A complete archana basket includes milk, fruit, flowers, a coconut, incense, kunkuma, camphor, sandlewood paste and a monetary offering. You should at least bring fruit and flowers. As you stand in front of the shrine, the priest will ask your name, your gotra (family lineage) and your nakshatra (birthstar). Usually, he will direct you in reciting a short Sanskrit verse. When the puja is complete, the priest will return to you a portion of your offerings. Take these home to your altar.

Sacraments

Samskaras, the Hindu rites of passage, are temple or home rituals marking the important transitional events in a person's life, such as name-giving, coming of age, marriage and death. One can arrange for a samskara with the temple priest. There is a charge for these sometimes elaborate ceremonies which usually include a puja and homa or fire ceremony. The priest will set an auspicious time, explain how to prepare and what to bring, as well as what you do during the ceremony. The principal samskaras offered are: name-giving (done at 40 days

for a child, or anytime for converts entering Hinduism); first solid food (one year old); ear-piercing (one year); head-shaving (three years); first letters (four years); coming of age for boys and girls, and marriage. Funeral rites are conducted by specially designated priests .