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Cultural Cues

How to Visit a Hindu Temple

Writing for the popular Huffington Post, Deepa Iyer created a basic guide for Westerners on how to survive--and enjoy--their first visit to a temple

By Deepa S. Iyer

When I sat down to write a post on how to visit a Hindu temple, I'll admit that I was initially baffled. How does one visit a Hindu temple? In a literal sense, it appears obvious. First, get yourself to one. Second, take off your shoes, and third, step in. Visit, in the most fundamental sense of the word, accomplished.

A visit anywhere, though, is so much more than just the physical action of stepping in and stepping out. The significance varies from one individual to the next. A vacation to Spain or a business trip to Detroit sound vastly different, but both involve the individual going through the motions of life in a given location and concocting a mental snapshot of the entire experience to pull out in the future.

A trip's purpose doesn't always have concrete shape and form. Because many might not have a tangible reason for visiting a Hindu temple (including myself on many occasions), I instead decided to make this a Lonely Planet-style guide to visiting it. This role of a guide of sorts, helping the interested visitor, is more illuminating than telling people how to visit a place.

It is not every Hindu who attends temples. Some schools of Hinduism even eschew temples and the rituals often affiliated with them. And there is no such thing as the average temple. They reflect the diversity of Hinduism itself, varying architecturally by region, town or village of India, by historical era and philosophical school of

thought, or by a specific diaspora's spiritual inclinations. However, as I perceive it, there are three rules of thumb, features that a visitor has a high probability of facing when stopping by any Hindu temple.

Rule of Thumb 1: The Confluence of Polytheism and Monotheism

First and foremost, a temple features either one or several shrines containing murtis, images of Hindu Deities to whom the shrines are dedicated. Often a single shrine will dominate the others, reflecting the temple's affiliation with a primary Deity. You may witness devotees circling the shrines clockwise, letting go of worldly thoughts before they stand before the God, or offering prayers in front of the Deity.

To me, a recognition of unity in diversity presides at nearly every Hindu temple: an arena in which polytheism and monotheism fluidly interact. Even as multiple shrines combine to form a single temple, several Deities mirror the diversity of the indescribable Brahman, the ultimate consciousness underlying existence.

Rule of Thumb 2: The Confluence of Ritual and Devotion

Murtis often reflect the bhakti, or devotional, aspect of Hinduism. Age-old stories of justice, compassion and love encourage us to honor a Deity, placing Him or Her on a pedestal within a temple and striving to connect with that transcendental being.

Inside the temple halls, perhaps the most colorful event that a visitor might notice is the observance of rituals, or pujas, that represent offerings to the Divine. Typically, such rituals symbolize the relationship between the Supreme and the individual, humanizing the Supreme and conversely implying the presence of God in the individual's heart. Rituals involve waking the Deity up in the morning with Sanskrit chants, bathing the Deity with milk, clarified butter and water, dressing the Deity and, in the evening, symbolically putting Him or Her to sleep.

Rule of Thumb 3: The Confluence of Individual and Infinite

Pilgrims attend a temple to receive darshan, meaning "sight" in Sanskrit: a metaphysical/metaphorical connection with the Supreme. The image represents an aid for mentally forging this connection.

See the priest circling the Deity with a flame and then extending it to the temple-goers? This is the arati ceremony, which occurs multiple times a day at nearly all Hindu temples. One explanation is that an arati represents the symbolic surrender of one's existence to the Supreme: a moment that many individuals use for introspection and prayer. As it circles the Deity, the flame symbolizes the individual soul's lifelong journey. Then the priest extends the flame, one-by-one, to each individual in the crowd beside the shrine: a union of all within an ultimate circle of consciousness. But there are many more explanations for it, and layers of meaning, as with everything in a Hindu temple.

If ever you plan to book a trip to your nearest Hindu temple, I hope that this brief guide gives you some food for thought. On a less symbolic level than my rules of thumb, they're great places to go for general people watching and good food--many have scrumptious vegetarian cafeterias. So, if you feel like wandering over to the nearest Hindu temple, here's to a happy and, hopefully, more informed visit.

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