

J. Ramón Gil-García, Triparna S. Vasavada

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Visiting a Hindu Temple: A Description of a Subjective Experience and Some Preliminary Interpretations

J. Ramón Gil-García* y Triparna S. Vasavada**

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* *Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany, Universidad Estatal de Nueva York.*

Correo electrónico: jgil-garcia@ctg.albany.edu

** *Estudiante del Doctorado en Administración y Políticas Públicas en el Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy, University at Albany, Universidad Estatal de Nueva York.*

Visitando un Templo Hindú: una descripción de la experiencia subjetiva y algunas interpretaciones preliminares

Resumen. Académicos de diferentes disciplinas coinciden en que la cultura es un fenómeno complejo y su comprensión requiere de un análisis detallado. La complejidad inherente al estudio de patrones culturales y otras estructuras sociales no se deriva de su rareza en la sociedad. De hecho, están contenidas y representadas en eventos y artefactos de la vida cotidiana. Sin embargo, probablemente debido a esta frecuente interacción, en muchas ocasiones los individuos consideran obvia la existencia de estas estructuras macro-sociales y por tanto se vuelven difíciles de percibir. Un templo Hindú es un lugar en el que los artefactos físicos y las interacciones sociales reflejan ciertos patrones culturales y determinadas estructuras sociales. Este estudio proporciona una descripción detallada del espacio físico y una interpretación preliminar de los artefactos y acciones observadas dentro de un templo Hindú en los Estados Unidos. Algunos datos históricos y contextuales relevantes son proporcionados para enriquecer la presentación.

Palabras clave: Cultura, Estructuras Sociales, Hinduismo, Observación, Experiencia Subjetiva.

Abstract. Scholars from different disciplines would agree that culture is a complex phenomenon requiring careful analysis to be understood. The complexity of studying cultural patterns and other general social structures does not arise from their rarity in society. In fact, they are instantiated in everyday events and artifacts. However, probably due to this frequent interaction, individuals often take these macro-social structures for granted, and therefore they are difficult to be perceived. A Hindu temple is a place in which physical artifacts and social interactions reflect certain cultural patterns and social structures. This study provides a rich description of the physical setting and preliminary interpretation of the artifacts and actions observed inside a Hindu temple in the United States. Some relevant historical and contextual backgrounds is provided to enrich the presentation.

Key words. Culture, Social Structures, Hinduism, Observation, Subjective Experience.

Introduction

Visiting a Hindu temple can be a very enriching experience for those interested in understanding other realities and visions of the world. Religion and religious experiences are important cultural aspects of people from different national backgrounds. Learning about the religious experiences of various social groups can provide significant insights into other characteristics of these cultures and their diversity. For instance, the Hindu religion can be characterized as a Banyan tree with many branches and roots. The branches of Banyan trees develop their own roots, and the tree grows forever. Although the Banyan tree has many branches, roots, leaves, and flowers, it is only a single entity. Just like the Banyan tree, Hinduism is an ever-growing unified entity, with ongoing diverse beliefs and customs.

This paper presents a subjective experience of being in a Hindu temple. Observation is a powerful technique for understanding a cultural setting by investigating and discovering social premises and basic behavioral assumptions. The researcher subjectively captures this cultural aspect through his or her interaction with the physical artifacts and social actors. A Hindu temple is a place in which artifacts and social interactions reflect cultural patterns and other social structures. Throughout the different sections, this paper guides the reader to an understanding of the different facets of Hinduism and the experience of being in a temple and participating in a puja. Puja is an act of worship or reverence to a god and can be done as part of a Hindu religious service. This study attempts to provide a rich description of the setting and also a preliminary interpretation of the symbols, actions, and meanings of the temple and the puja.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section One gives a rich and detailed description of the temple's physical setting, specifically its main room, the sanctorum. This section includes explanations of some of the main gods. In Section Two, the religious ceremony, or Puja, is described, and some of the meanings of its actions are explained. Section Three gives a preliminary and subjective interpretation of some of the actions and symbols inside a Hindu temple and their relationships with Hindu culture and society. It also presents a brief historical background of Hindu religion and some of the reasons why temples are important in Hindu culture. Finally, we present some final comments and reflections.

1. The Temple: Describing the Physical Setting

The temple is a white building with numerous (approximately seven) red domes or cupolas. The cupolas are not hemispherical, but pyramidal, with square bases. The temple typically occupies a large area, and despite the houses around it, gives the appearance of a very open space with plenty of trees and vegetation. Entrance is through a lateral door, which opens to a small room similar to a lobby, with a big closet where people leave their jackets, coats, and shoes. Clothes hangers are available for jackets and coats, and little square cabinets are available for accommodating shoes. The room is a little dark and, apart from the closet, is furnished only with a red carpet that leads to one of the entrances to a big hall. After taking off their shoes and jackets in this lobby, devotees follow the red carpet into the hall, or sanctorum, which accommodates images of different gods. This is the main part of the temple, and the principal venue for pujas to the gods.

The sanctorum is very illuminated and has a red carpet on the floor. The natural illumination comes mainly from a crystal dome located in the middle of the roof and several windows around the upper part of the room. The room is prism-shaped, with six or seven sides. To the right of the entrance inside the sanctorum is a bell. After the bell is a first altar dedicated to the Snake God. This altar, which is about seven feet high, has a rectangular base, with pillars supporting a pyramidal roof. On this altar are three human-like figures made of black stone. The one in the middle is the Snake God, who is in the company of his daughter and wife. All three have a halo made of snakes. The tails of the snakes are in the backs of the gods, and the body and heads form the halo around the gods' heads. These gods are dressed in what seems to be traditional Indian silk clothes or royal apparel, because in Hindu mythology many of the gods are regarded as kings in the land of gods.

The next altar is square based, with a pyramidal roof supported by four pillars. This is the altar of the planets. It is believed each planet moves at its own speed around the earth. The position of these planets and their intersections at different times of the year influence the earth and the lives of humans on earth. The human-like figures, icons of different gods representing nine planets, are placed in a 3x3 matrix. They each face a different direction, because each planet is placed in its own particular direction in relation to other planets. These human-like figures carved in black stone represent the planets Mars, Mercury, Venus, Jupiter, and Saturn as well as the moon and the sun, and two other planets called Rahu and Ketu, which do not have any physical or celestial bodies like the other planets do. Rahu and Ketu are at the northerly and southerly points



at which the Moon crosses the ecliptic or the path of the Sun respectively. Rahu is exactly 180 degrees away from Ketu (for more information see Kak, 1996). According to Hinduism, these are very sensitive and effective points, which have a powerful influence on human affairs.

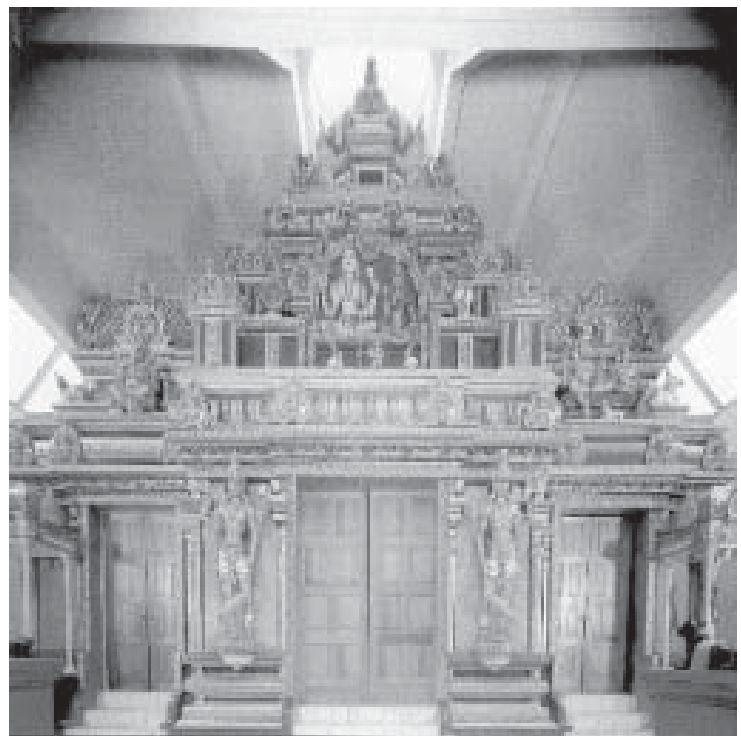
Following this altar is another, long altar formed by three square white spaces, covered with ceramic tiles. They have flowers and a ghee (a kind of butter) lamp in front of each god. All the deities seem to be made of marble. A male figure called Swaminarayan occupies the first space. He is not dressed in fabric but rather has clothes painted in orange. An orange dress and a yellow U-shaped tilak (drawing on the forehead) represent this sub-sect of the Hindu religion. Devotees of Swaminarayan range from the lower income group to the wealthy business class. This sect is one of the most organized groups of the Hindu religion. The devotees are a closely-knit community who help each other in many respects as they see themselves as one big Swaminarayan parivar (family). They believe the most important thing is to help each other have a better life. In general, temples are strongly organized religious institutions. People who donate more money to them are perceived as more powerful and have a strong say in decision-making on behalf of the temple. Such a contributory role also brings higher status in the society.

In the second place on this altar is another couple god called Radha-Krishna. Radhaji, the beloved of Krishna, is a married woman older than Krishna. Their love is regarded as one of the purest and most intense and romantic. The dance of Radha-Krishna, called Ras-leela, is one of the most famous forms of dancing in India today. Krishna represents the worldly side of a human being. He is seen as Pur-

Picture 1. Outside the Temple



Picture 2. Inside the Temple



neshwar, meaning a complete god, who is good with good and bad with evil. Lord Krishna takes many forms, and each form represents a different character and emotions. These forms represent roles such as teacher, philosopher, and helper, and such attributes as friendship, happiness, enjoyment,

dancing, romancing, sorrow, etc. Krishna has been portrayed as a great philosopher in the epic called Mahabharata, in which he narrated the Gita, one of the sacred books of Hinduism (Rao, 1992), which, in terms of its importance to Hindu devotees, can be compared to the Bible's importance to

Picture 3. Idols inside the Temple



Christians. The third space is occupied by another form of Krishna, who represents money and trade. In Hinduism, gods can have several representations and different names according to those representations. This form of Krishna is worshipped by the business and trade caste, the class that represents wealth. This image is a human-like figure with money representations, such as gold, jewelry, and other objects related to wealth and an affluent livelihood.

After this altar is a smaller bell, which precedes the main altar. The main altar is very different from the first three. It is more like a small house, an individual mini temple, with three rooms inside and two spaces outside. The surface is very colorful, and its pyramidal roof has sculptures of the three main gods in the temple. The colors are very vivid and bright. The altar is approximately nine feet tall and reaches the roof of the sanctum. The peak of the pyramidal roof points to a small crystal dome located exactly above the peak.

Going from right to left, in the first outside space, is Lord Shiva's wife, the Goddess Parvati or Lalitha, who is also a symbol of Shakti (strength). In the

first inside space is Shiva, who is the God of Creation and Destruction. Lord Shiva is also represented in different forms. In this temple Shiva is represented as lingam, a penis-head form, over a base. Both are made of black stone. He is dressed with two colorful pieces of cloth and decorated with a special red and yellow paint and some flowers. The floor is also covered with black stone. Shiva can also have a human-like representation like the one in the roof of the altar. The penis form is related to reproduction and is considered more powerful. In front of Shiva's space is a kind of table on which rests the figure of an ox called Nandi. Nandi plays the role of gatekeeper and is responsible for keeping Shiva free of disturbances while he is in meditation.

The central inside space is dedicated to Laxmi and Narayan, the main gods in this temple. Narayan is always accompanied by his wife Laxmi (the goddess of money). They are dressed in what seems to be traditional Indian royal clothes made from silk fabric. Both images are human-like figures made of black stone. This central space is a little bigger, and its walls are covered with

marble tiles. The floor is also covered with black tiles. One of the possible reasons for the use of these materials is that during the puja, gods are bathed with water and milk. Therefore, for practicality both God figures and their spaces need to be resistant to water erosion and relatively easy to clean.

In the third space is a figure representing Ganesha, the Elephant God or the God of Good Luck, who is the son of Shiva. Carved out of black stone, Ganesha is a human-like figure with some elephant characteristics, and is alone in the space he occupies. His head is that of an elephant, and he is fatter than all the other gods. He is dressed with two pieces of cloth folded in a very peculiar way. One of them is around his hip, and the other is around his neck. Finally, in the left-side outside space is Ganesha's brother, Balasubramanyan.

Another bell is located between the main altar and a fifth one. All three bells hang on the wall, and people only need to pull a rope to ring them. The fifth altar, a long, white one divided into three equal spaces, is very similar to the third, and is also covered with ceramic tiles. Going from right to left, in the first space, is Lord Rama or Sree Ramjee. He is accompanied by his wife Sitamata, his brother Lakshmanje, and his monkey-like devotee Hanumanjee. Rama is known for his amazing divine powers.

The second space is devoted to Shri Mahavir Swami. This god is a representation of meditation and the power to control the human senses. According to some traditional Indian stories, Shri Mahavir Swami has meditated for several years. He is the 24th saint of the Jains, a religion similar to Buddhism and Hinduism. In the third space is Dharmasastha. This god is represented by a golden figure. He is dressed with two pieces of cloth. There is a golden,

circular halo behind the figure. Beside him is a small representation of Shiva in his penis-head form.

The seventh altar is devoted to Ma Durga, the Goddess of Strength and Power. She is considered to be the demolisher of devils. According to some traditional Indian stories, Durga helped other gods kill one of the most powerful demons. She is represented by a golden image, a sculpture in which she is portrayed as a warrior killing a demon. She is riding a lion and has eight arms. It is believed each arm represents the power of other gods transmitted to the goddess Durga to demolish the demon. There is a colorful rug in the background of the space.

Finally, on the eighth altar is Shri Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge. She is the consort of Brahma, the God of Creation. A human-like figure made of black stone, she is dressed in traditional Indian clothes and represented alone on a separate altar. She possesses the powers of speech, wisdom, and learning, and has four hands representing four aspects of the human personality in learning –mind, intellect, alertness, and ego.

2. The Puja

In the Hindu religion, Puja is a devotional ritual in which devotees make symbolic offerings of their lives and activities to God. It is also the means through which an individual can attain spiritual union with the divine. The word puja consists of two letters, “pa” and “ja”, and different meanings are attributed to the word. “Pa” represents “parayan” or the continuous verbal repetition of the names of God, and “ja” means “japa” or continuous mental recitation of the names of God. According to this interpretation, Puja is the continuous act of focusing on God through verbal and mental con-

centration. Another interpretation indicates that “pu” means “pushpam” (flower) and “ja” means “Jalam” (water), and so Puja is a ceremony in which devotees offer their lives and souls to God using flowers and water. The following section describes the ritual of Puja as observed in a Hindu temple.

2.1. Group Puja

The priest wears a traditional dress, which comprises two pieces of cloth. The first cloth is similar to a skirt, but is joined in the middle, so it also resembles a pair of pants. The second piece of cloth is a long rectangle the priest wears like a cape; it also covers his chest and belly. This piece resembles similar garments worn by the Greeks and Romans. As the priest passes temple devotees, he greets them modestly with a slight smile and a slight bowing of the head.

He then starts preparing all the necessary materials for the Puja –water, milk, flowers, and oil lamps. He follows this by removing the clothes of Lord Ganesha. Then he goes to Lord Shiva’s place and takes his clothes off too. He takes flowers and used diya (oil lamps) and throws them into two garbage cans at either side of the main altar. The priest then takes the oil lamps out of Ganesha and Shiva’s rooms. While he is doing this cleaning, the people follow him from Ganesha to Shiva’s space and from Shiva to Ganesha’s space. After this first cleaning phase, the priest fills a bucket with water from a faucet inside Ganesha’s space. When the bucket is full, he takes it to the front of Ganesha. He then takes a small silver container called a kalash and starts chanting some mantras in Sanskrit. He continues chanting the rest of the puja. His chanting is loud and very fast.

While chanting, the priest first takes some water with his fingers and

splashes it towards the God image. Then he starts bathing the base of the image with water. He moves progressively from the base to the head of Ganesha, cleaning the small painted circles adorning the image; some of these represent the seven chakras. The yellow paint is sandalwood powder mixed with rose or natural water. The most important chakra is the one in the middle of the forehead. Sometimes this chakra is called the third eye. Only Shiva is considered to have a totally open third eye.

After the first bath with water, the priest takes a gallon of milk and pours it into a small container. Without stopping his chanting, he starts bathing Ganesha with milk. He continues filling the container and pouring the milk over Ganesha until he has used about half the gallon. Then he fills the bucket with water again and takes it to the front of Ganesha and starts rinsing the image. He is very scrupulous in the way he bathes Ganesha and Ganesha’s space. First, he rinses Ganesha’s head, then his body and then the base. Finally, the priest rinses the whole floor of the room. He is always very careful not to allow any milk on the image or on the floor.

After finishing with Ganesha, the priest takes the small container and goes to Shiva’s space. He repeats the same steps with Shiva, but in addition to the silver kalash, he uses a golden container. He also does a milk bathing and final rinsing. He is again very careful and meticulous while bathing Shiva and cleaning Shiva’s room. During some part of the puja with Shiva, the priest rings a bell inside the room.

Once the priest finishes rinsing Shiva’s room, he goes back to Ganesha’s space and dries the floor and entrance steps with a towel. He might touch the base of the image with a towel, but he never touches Ganesha’s body or head. Then

he goes back to Shiva's room and dries the floor and entrance steps too. He tries to dry most of the water on the image too, this time using his hands, not the towel.

Afterwards, the priest goes to a supply room at the back of the main altar and brings some clean clothes to dress Ganesha. The priest folds one piece of the cloth in a very particular manner. Using only one of his hands, he folds the piece of cloth into four-inch segments. With the other hand, he holds the opposite side of the cloth. The result is a multiple-folded cloth the priest uses to form a dhoti (a kind of skirt) for Ganesha. The priest then takes the other piece of cloth and puts it around Ganesha's neck so that it covers just the back of the neck. The extremes rest between Ganesha's chest and arms, similar to a scarf. The priest then decorates Ganesha's image with flowers. Then he goes to the central space of the altar to get two small golden containers with the yellow and red liquid made of sandalwood (yellow) powder and kumkum (red) powder. Using first the yellow liquid, then the red one, the priest does tilak (round or U-shaped mark) and delineates Ganesha's seven chakras on different parts of his body.

After finishing his ritual with Ganesha, he goes back to Shiva's room and starts dressing him. He extends the first piece of cloth and puts it around the image, covering part of the base. The second piece of cloth is placed on top of the image, and the extremes are allowed to hang at both sides. The priest decorates Shiva also with the special paint and some flowers. He then performs tilak, marking the three parallel lines on the penis-head form of Shiva (the shivalingam). This symbolizes the worship of the most powerful third eye, which Shiva possesses.

After finishing the dressing and decoration phases, the priest goes to the

central room and gets a ghee (Indian butter) lamp. With the lamp turned on, he goes to Ganesha's room and does aarti, a circular movement of the lamp, in front of Ganesha several times. Then, the priest goes to Shiva's room and does the aarti of Shiva with circular movements there. Afterwards, facing the attendants, the priest does the same circular movement with the oil lamp, and some people walk close to him to receive the god's energy. Some do a movement with their hands from her forehead to the back part of her head as a symbol of respect. The priest offers water to the attendants, and they take some with their hands and drink it. Then the priest goes to one of the tables in front of the main altar and the central space in the main altar to bring some apples and bananas as prasadam, an offering to God. Meanwhile, people put money on a tray as a token individual offering to God. Finally, the priest gives apples and bananas as a prasadam, a symbol of the blessings of God to the attendants.

2.2. Individual Puja

Individual praying has a special importance for Hindu people and is a way to have a unique religious experience in a temple. First, the person rings the bell when he or she enters. The symbolic meaning of ringing the bell is to ask the gods' permission to intrude on them during their meditation. Then the devotee stops for a few seconds in front of each of the altars with head bowed, and palms together in an attitude of prayer. This action is the same for all altars, except that of the planets. At the planets' altar the devotee does something different. She/he goes around the altar in a clockwise direction. This may be because some of the nine images on this altar face in different directions, and not just to the front.

Some people also bow their whole body while praying. There are two variants of this more integral bowing. In the first, people rest on their knees and incline with their hands in front of their faces until their hands touch the floor palms-down. In the second variation, people lie down on the floor (face down) with their arms totally extended in front of their head and their palms together. Such bowing is done only in front of the main god of the temple or in front of the god in whom the individual believes the most. After finishing the initial bowing, the worshipper goes closer to the god's room to have some prasadam, some sweets and fruit, as blessings of the god. No individual ever leaves the temple without having prasadam. At the end, before leaving the temple, devotees bow their heads again in front of the gods to ask permission to leave the temple.

3. Understanding the relationships between temples and Hindu culture

An attempt to interpret religious beliefs and symbols is a challenging task, as a good deal of subjectivism and value judgment exists in doing so. In this section we attempt to examine the possible relationships between the physical setting, symbols, beliefs, rituals and broader aspects of the Hindu culture. Throughout Indian history, temples have exercised an enormous influence on religious, political and social life, as well as on traditions (Michell, 1988). For instance, in Indian Hindu culture the concept of elevated temples symbolizes the importance of spirituality over worldly life.

Kings and wealthy citizens in the community provide generous funds for the construction and maintenance of temples. Temples were symbols of royal authority and political power (Gautam,



2003). Temples have contributed to the employment of architects, artisans, sculptors, and laborers. Music, dance and fine-arts programs, including religious and musical discourses, are staged in the temples and have encouraged musicians, dancers, dramatists, artists, and religious scholars (Champakalakshmi and Usha, 2001). The granaries of temples have been used to feed the hungry, and temple buildings have provided shelter to both scholars and students. Some temples are even equipped to provide medical services to the sick, elderly, and disabled. Thus, temples provide a variety of religious and social services and reinforce the economic and social fabric of Indian society. In the US, Hindu temples act as cultural ambassadors and provide spiritual and educational services to the Indian community. Temples in the US serve also as cultural hubs where the Indian community can get together to celebrate various festivals. As the reader can see, in Hinduism, religion and culture are complexly intertwined. The next sections highlight four important relationships between Hindu religion, culture, philosophy, and society: the design of the temple, the sense of community, devotion in everyday life, and the role of castes in society and religion.

3.1. Temple Design and Hindu Philosophy

Hindus tend to believe a temple is designed to dissolve the boundaries between the human and the divine. All aspects of the Hindu temple focus on the goal of enlightenment and liberation. Therefore, by implication, the whole universe is identified with the temple's design. Ancient sages of India laid down several principles for constructing buildings. Among these were to take advantage of nature, and the Pancha Bhootas –namely earth, space,

air, fire and water, gravitational and magnetic effects and the rotational influences of the sun, moon, earth and other planets on life on earth, with a view to establishing balance and harmony between man, nature and his buildings and thereby ensuring peace, prosperity, and happiness. This science containing principles and practices of constructing buildings is called Vastushastra. According to Vastushastra, the ground plan for a temple is described as a symbolic, miniature representation of the cosmos. The temple is the representation of the cosmos both at the level of the universe and the individual, making it possible for the devotee to become inspired to achieve his own spiritual transformation. The cosmos is expressed in terms of various astronomical connections between the temple structure and the motions of the sun, moon, and the planets (Kak, 2002). The design of the temple is based on a strict grid made up of squares and equilateral triangles, which are imbued with deep religious significance. To the Indian priest-architect the square was an absolute and mystical form. The square shape represents the heavens, with the four directions representing the cardinal directions, as well as the two solstices and equinoxes of the sun's orbit.

The grid, usually of 64 or 81 squares, is in fact a mandala, a model of the cosmos, with each square belonging to a deity. The position of the squares is in accordance with the importance attached to each of the deities, with the square in the center representing the temple deity; the outer squares cover the other gods. Another important aspect of the design of the ground plan is that it is intended to lead from the temporal world to the eternal. According to Vastushastra, the principal shrine should face the rising sun and so should have its entrance to the east.

A typical Hindu temple consists of the following major elements –an entrance, often with a porch; one or more attached or detached mandalas or halls; the inner sanctum called the garbagriha, literally 'womb chamber'; and the tower built directly above the garbagriha. Besides the ground plan, there are other important aspects of the temple which connect it to the phenomenal world - its site in relation to shade and water, its vertical elevation relating to the mountains, and the most sacred part, the garbagriha, relating to caves. It is believed caves provide a calm and isolated environment for individuals seeking unity with the divine as they worship their gods. Because India is a vast country with great diversity, it is futile to generalize any aspect of religion. Similarly, temple design varies greatly from north India to south India and from big temple to small temple. However, they all follow the guidelines described in the Vastushastra.

3.2. Karma, Giving, and Sense of Community

Hindus believe their lives are merely stages in the progression to ultimate enlightenment (Roy, 1974). The philosophy is that Iswara would not create the inequalities that exist in the world. These inequalities in life are understood by the theory of karma. According to karma (law of action), humans' own actions are the cause of their good or bad life. Hindus believe current life is determined by the good or bad actions, thoughts, and words of previous lives (Athavale, 2001). This doctrine of rebirth is also called the theory of reincarnation. These beliefs are strongly rooted in Indian Hindu culture and are reflected in such rituals as donating money to the temple, visiting the temple regularly, and performing pujas for each god and goddess. In fact, as mentioned early, the puja includes a specific mo-

ment in which people donate money and also a specific moment in which people receive fruit as a symbol of God's blessing.

Visiting the temple once a day was considered to be a good practice to build good karma. In today's busy life many Hindus visit the temple once a week. Most Hindus have a small temple at home and they pray to their gods at home every day, sometimes twice a day. One important function of the temple is to perform group Puja and Aarti (the burning of lamps and waving them clockwise before a deity is called Aarti). Aarti is generally performed by a priest twice a day: once in the morning and once in the evening. Aarti represents the community-oriented culture of the society. In Indian culture Aarti is a time for people to get together in a group and sing common prayers to God. This ritual increases the sense of the community in the individual who attends Aarti. Once Aarti is finished, the priest goes to each individual with the dish of lamps. Most people donate some money. As mentioned before, giving is considered good karma, and giving in the name of God or to the temple is considered to be even better. By donating money, individuals believe they are collecting good karma for the next birth. In terms of social structure, except for big temples, priests are volunteers who are paid small salaries. In that case Aarti money goes to the priest. People of the community and visitors to the temple, collectively maintain the temple and the priest. However, in modern days, priests have other day jobs, so the Aarti money would be additional income in the form of tips, or the money would go to the temple's general funds for its maintenance. Therefore, temples are spaces for increasing the sense of community by participating in group pujas and some other social and cultural events.

3.3. God, Devotion, and Everyday Life

Despite the multiplicity of Gods in any Hindu temple, Hindus believe in one absolute God, who in its highest form is called Brahman (the Absolute). It is considered the universal soul. It is immanent, within and about us, and also transcendent, outside material existence, transcending time and space. It is called Nirguna, without shape and form, and without beginning and end. Nirguna (formless) Brahman is not considered either male or female and is referred to by the impersonal pronoun, Tat (that). The Upanishads, the most important part of the Hindu scriptures called Vedas, explain that the whole Universe is a manifestation of Brahman. Life in all its forms has evolved from this single source of energy. It is considered the Universal Spirit, which passes through all life and things animate and inanimate. For ordinary lay people, Nirguna Brahman is difficult to comprehend and is impersonal. Therefore, keeping common humans in mind, the scriptures explained Saguna Brahman, the Brahman with form and attributes known as the One Great God or Ishwara. The temple serves as a center for the worship of Ishwara and undertaking related spiritual activities of everyday life in the Hindu community. The temple is also perceived as a place where one can go beyond the world of humans, a place where god can be approached and divine knowledge can be discovered.

There are believed to be three main paths to accomplish spiritual union with Brahman. Bhakti Yoga (through devotion), Karma Yoga (through action), Jnana Yoga (through wisdom or spiritual enlightenment). Most devotees choose Bhakti Yoga or devotional worship to pray to God. In this path, the individual chooses a form of Saguna

Brahma in any one of his manifestations (different images of God) and discovers the god through love and devotion. Puja is a core part of Bhakti Yoga. An individual performs Puja as a ritual to connect and worship the god. Each part of the material used in Puja has a symbolic meaning, and is woven into the culture of the society. For instance, the round circular spot or linear spot of sandalwood powder or red powder (kumkum) worn at the center of the forehead by an individual doing Puja, by the priest or by deities is to adorn the latent wisdom, the concentration of mind, which is vital to the worship. Women and girls in India wear a red mark, as red is considered an auspicious color. Nowadays, women and girls wear different colors and it has become an integral part of daily dressing and fashion. However, in modern times, men wear the mark only during worship. During the puja, lighting the lamps before the images symbolizes the dispersing of ignorance and the enlightenment of the mind with knowledge. Sprinkling water suggests the purification of one's own self and surroundings. Offerings of flowers symbolize the souls of worshippers being offered to God. Fruits and other foods are offered to thank God for His grace. Incense is waved at the end of Puja as a symbol of the fragrance of God's love. Thus, every action during the puja represents to certain extent important social values within the Hindu culture such as the importance of knowledge and giving.

3.4. Religion and Castes

In Hindu religious scriptures there is a reference to the division of Hindu society according to four castes – Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras. These castes are represented in the temple and each of them worships certain Gods and Goddesses. The scriptures relate how the Brahmanas



came out of the face of the Lord, the Creator; the Kshatriyas from His arms; the Vaisyas from His thighs; and the Sudras from His feet. However, there is no mention of anything like the caste system in the ancient Vedic religion, which is considered to be the original source of today's Hindu religion (the Vedic period dates back to around 1,500 BC). In later times, Sage Manu conceived the caste system. For a long time, the caste system served as a form of division of labor in which each individual had a role to play according to her/his mental and physical endowments on a hereditary basis, to ensure uninterrupted continuity in the provision of the needed services and goods.

In modern India, caste does not limit occupation any more. For example, a Visya person can teach in a university and Brahmins do indulge in trade and acquire wealth. In fact, the caste system has been more or less abolished since Indian independence and the distinctions are beginning to disappear slowly. However, the caste system still exists in the culture of the society and is in some way instantiated in the organization of idols in modern temples. In general, each caste has some level

of differences in the traditions and rituals they perform for marriage, baby shower, and other social/religious events. Each caste also has its one primary God it believes strongly in. However, this does not mean all other gods are not worshipped by this caste.

Final Comments

Visiting a Hindu temple is a very enriching experience for people from any religious or cultural background. Observing a cultural setting is a very powerful way to realize how many things we take for granted in daily life. In a religious service, an observer is overwhelmed by the amount of information, both perceived from observation and interpreted through interviews with devotees. Reverence and daily activities are combined in a Hindu religious service. The physical representations of Hindu gods are treated with great respect by the performance of daily activities, such as providing a bath and clean clothes. It is important to clarify that these images or deities are not believed to be God, but symbols of God. For com-

mon devotees, such images help them to concentrate fully on God, in the first stage of their worship. The use of images in worship was not known in ancient times, but was introduced later, mainly for the purpose of worship by the masses.

Visiting a Hindu temple allows the observer to understand part of the philosophy and customs of Hindu culture, such as its service spirit, its concept of friendship, and the importance of the couple (man and woman) in Hindu society. Religion and culture are aspects of people's lives that are complexly intertwined. Religion contains some of the more fundamental aspects of any cultural institutions. Understanding religious experiences is a powerful way to learn about the culture of different nations. This paper shows how much we can learn about Hindu culture by observing and experiencing its fundamental characteristics that are instantiated in the physical setting and social interactions within a Hindu temple. It also provides some interpretations and background information to better understand the complex relationships between religion, culture, philosophy, society, and the physical settings.

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