

I • The Experience

Approaching God

STEPHEN P. HUYLER

Having just shaved and bathed, Ramachandran wraps the three meters of his clean, freshly starched white cotton *dhoti* around his waist. He places a matching shawl over his shoulders, leaving his chest bare. He then steps into his rubber sandals and slips out the door of his home. Just in front of him, on the ground before the door, his younger sister has almost finished painting an elaborate *kolan*, a sacred design made with bleached rice flour (see figure 2). It is an activity that either she or his mother or his aunt performs every day of the year. As he walks carefully around it he admires the beautiful lotus she is creating. All around him the town is coming to life. He weaves among countless other kolams as he moves down the street, waving to his neighbor, an old man intent on milking his cow. Ramachandran is on his way to the temple.

Today is Tuesday, dedicated in southern India to the Goddess Mariamman, the embodiment of Shakti, the feminine power that conquers evil and heals disorder. When Ramachandran was sixteen he vowed that for the rest of his life he would fast every Tuesday. Now, ten years have passed, and he still maintains his vow. After his bath before sunrise, he drank a cup of tea and ate some rice cakes. For the rest of the day he will have only liquids, keeping his mind and body ritually pure in order to be a proper vessel for the Goddess's guidance. Although Ramachandran worships

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FIGURE 2
Adorning a *kolam* diagram, Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Photo by Stephen Huyler.

Mariamman every day in his household shrine, on Tuesdays he chooses to go to the temple. Usually he goes alone, although sometimes he is accompanied by other family members.

Near the temple the streets grow more crowded (see figure 3). From the stalls on each side hawkers call out their wares. Many sell the offerings that devotees take to the temple; others sell objects that are used in household shrines. Ramachandran purchases a coconut and a packet of white camphor from the vendors that he frequents every week. He puts these into the small wicker basket that he carries, which already contains some bananas and the bright red hibiscuses that he picked from the garden behind his home.

He approaches the temple gate, then leaves his sandals at the door and steps inside. Already he can hear the clanging of bells from the sanctum. Repeating the name of his Goddess—“Mariamman, Mariamman, Mariamman”—he joins the many other devotees who circle the central temple in a clockwise direction. Returning to the entrance, he pushes through the crowd to enter the temple itself. Inside it is dark and cool, filled with the thick, sweet smell of incense. Ramachandran joins the line of other male worshippers to the left of the inner sanctum. The women, wearing their brightest saris and flowers in their hair, line up opposite him.



FIGURE 3
On the way to temple, Srirangam, Tamil Nadu. Photo by Stephen Huyler.

Children are on both sides. He reaches up to ring a bell suspended from the stone ceiling. Its strong tone clears his brain of extraneous thought and allows him to focus on the deity. By craning his neck he can just get a glimpse of the blackened stone image of the Goddess. She is dressed in a brilliant red sari, her neck covered with jewels and garlands of flowers, her head crowned with a diadem. The priest comes down the line of devotees, collecting their offerings, and returns to the sanctum. A curtain is drawn across the shrine for a few minutes of eager anticipation. Then, amid the clamor of bells, it is opened. The image of Mariamman is radiantly beautiful to him, newly adorned with fresh flowers, including two of Ramachandran's hibiscuses. The priest waves a brass lamp lit with seven flames in a circular motion in front of the Goddess. Looking into the shrine, Ramachandran locks his eyes with those of the image: he has *darshan* with the Goddess. At that moment he is filled with a feeling of well-being, of centeredness and belonging. His world is in balance.

The priest then brings out a tray of lighted camphor. All the worshippers place their hands quickly into the cool flame before touching them to their closed eyelids, symbolically opening their souls to communion with the Divine. On the same tray are little mounds of white sacred ash and red vermilion powder. With the fourth finger of his right hand, Ramachandran puts a dot of each in the center of his forehead between his eyebrows, the ash symbolizing purification through worship and the red symbolizing Shakti, the power of the Goddess. Then each person's basket of offerings is returned, some of its contents remaining as a donation to the temple, the rest blessed by the Goddess to be shared by the devotees. Ramachandran will take this *prashad* back to his family, so that they may partake in Mariamman's blessing.

The purpose of his weekly temple visit is over, and Ramachandran must return home quickly. Once there he changes out of his dhoti and shawl and puts on the black pants and white buttoned shirt of his work attire. After drinking only a glass of water he mounts his bicycle to ride to the shop where all day he repairs the computers that are so essential to maintaining business in contemporary India. As he solders the memory boards of broken mainframe hardware, he is content in the memory of his link with his Goddess and with the rituals that bring balance to his life.

Like Ramachandran, many Hindus observe a weekly fast, the choice of day depending on the deity to whom they have vowed. Whether fasting or not, worshipping at home or in the temple, all Hindus begin their day by bathing. It is considered essential to approach a deity in as clean a manner as possible, both in body and in dress. Even the destitute will wash in a local reservoir or under a hand pump before approaching their household or community shrine. And those who live in the

desert or in drought conditions will sprinkle a few drops of precious water on their faces, hands, and feet before beginning their *pujas*. Those who can afford it always put on fresh clothes in order to pray, the men either in simple traditional dress or contemporary pants and shirts, the women, depending on the region, in their cleanest saris or sets of tunic and pajamas, or blouses, skirts, and veils. Footwear is always taken off before entering a shrine—one symbolically removes the dirt of the outside world and enters the sacred space clean in body and in spirit.

Once the image of a deity has been consecrated, Hindus believe it to be the deity incarnate, no matter what its form. It may be an unaltered element of nature, such as a rock or tree or body of water; or it could be a stone- or wood-carving, a casting in brass or bronze, a painting, even a mass-produced print. The rituals of consecration for temple images are elaborate and closely proscribed through ancient texts and canons. The installation of images in the household shrine may be less complex, depending on the traditions of the caste, family, and community; but once the images are consecrated they are viewed as deities themselves and accorded profound respect. Images in temples and shrines are given the same treatment that would be shown to royalty or to a very honored guest. In a temple, this preferential treatment, called *upacharas*, is carried out by the chief priest and, possibly, his assistants; in the home it is most often the responsibility of the senior female, the matriarch.

The first thing every morning, the image is gently awakened. Then it is bathed in holy water that comes from the Ganga (the Ganges River, which is also viewed as a Goddess) or from another sacred body of water. (There are many sacred rivers, streams, and springs in India.) Whatever its source, any water used in a shrine is considered mystically transformed into Ganga. After the image's initial bath it is anointed with substances believed to enhance its purity. (Prints or paintings, for obvious reasons, cannot receive daily applications of liquids. They are instead cleaned carefully and may be adorned with sacred powders or garlands of flowers.) Sculptures are first anointed with one substance, then rinsed with holy water; a second substance is applied, and again the sculpture is washed with water before the third application, and so on. These materials vary according to local traditions but often include honey, milk, yogurt, sandalwood paste or turmeric, coconut water, a mixture of five fruits (*panchamrita*), and sacred ash (*vibhuti*). Once cleaned and anointed, the image is dressed in garments befitting its gender and station: a dhoti and shawl, or a sari or skirt and veil. It will then be adorned with jewelry (bangles, necklaces, nose rings, and a crown), depending on the "wealth" that it has acquired over the years as gifts from devotees. Finally it will be garlanded with flowers. This bathing and anointing ceremony is usually conducted in private. Public viewing is

considered indiscreet and invasive to the deity. The image may be seen by others only when it is properly dressed and adorned. Few Westerners recognize that the manner in which Hindu sculptures are most often exhibited in museums, galleries, and private collections both inside and outside India is considered disrespectful by many Hindus. The images may be beautiful in elemental form and design, but without their ritual apparel and adornment their display is thought inappropriate.

Hindus chant prayers and songs of praise to the deity during all the ceremonies of preparation, as well as during the puja itself. Many of these prayers (*shlokas*) are derived from the Vedas and have been recited in this precise form for many thousands of years. Others were collected or written by sages and saints in the past two millennia. It is considered essential that shlokas be repeated precisely and with proper reverence. Hindus believe that the very name of a God or Goddess has magical properties, as do many other sacred words and verses. The cadence, quality, pitch, and vibration of a voice may pierce through the illusion of the material world and speak directly to God. In fact, many texts state that the Absolute, Brahman, is pure sound. Most classical Indian music is considered sacred, and fine musicians are treated as divinely inspired and are sometimes even regarded as saints, for through the magic of their voices and instruments they enable the listener to experience darshan. The tonal purity of bells ringing during a puja shatters the devotee's mundane train of thought and makes him or her directly receptive to the miracle of divine presence.

DIVINE GIFTS

Hinduism revolves around the concept of reciprocity: a devotee's life is enhanced by the gifts he or she bestows. Both religion and hereditary society are based on this principle. In a belief system that separates the unknowable Brahman into individually personified Gods and Goddesses, this exchange is essential. Most Hindu pujas involve expressions of thankfulness through the symbolic offering of gifts to the deity, usually in the form of food and flowers. The type of offering depends on the financial ability of the devotee as well as the climate, season, and local tradition. Those living in wet, tropical areas might offer rice, bananas, and fresh fruits, while those in drier environments may give breads or sweets made of wheat or millet, or simple pellets of sugar. People in northern India prefer to give garlands of marigolds and roses, while in the south devotees offer more exotic flowers, such as jasmine, tuberose, and hibiscus. Lotuses are highly valued as sacred gifts everywhere in India. Flowers are used to adorn the image of the deity, and food is placed

in close proximity to it. During the puja rituals the deity is believed to symbolically consume the food. In doing so, his or her sacred energy seeps into the flowers and the remaining food, transforming them with vibrant divine power.

Many of the items donated to shrines are purchased in markets just outside or even within the temple compound. Florists sell individual blooms and garlands of flowers strung together by hand, and fruit sellers provide coconuts, bananas, and other produce. Confectioners display varieties of sweets and cakes, all to be given to the Gods. Other vendors peddle incense and camphor. Many cater primarily to the needs of household shrines, stocking their stalls with framed and unframed prints of painted portraits of the principal deities being worshipped inside the temple, as well as those of many other Gods and Goddesses that might be of interest to devotees. Brass shops not only carry lamps, incense burners, trays, and water vessels, but also metal sculptures of popular Gods and Goddesses; other vendors sell the brocaded and embroidered costumes and miniature jewelry for these household images.

Certain occasions may require significant gifts to the Gods. The annual festival of one's patron deity may be an auspicious time to give something extra to the temple or shrine. Rituals that herald important life-changing events, such as birth, coming of age, or marriage, often involve the donation of presents to the family's temple. When a devotee prays for a specific boon from a deity—for example, the healing of a disease, success in a new project, or a raise in income—she or he promises to give a gift to the God or Goddess if the wish is granted. The quality and value of the gift depends on the financial capabilities of the donor. A common offering is a new garment for the image, often a cotton or silk sari or dhoti. Women may offer their own jewelry: glass, silver, or gold bangles or gold or silver bracelets, anklets, earrings, necklaces, or rings. Wealthy individuals might commission fine jewelry, such as a crown or diadem, or perhaps even silver or gold coverings for a part of the body of the image. Terra-cotta sculptures are given by the poor to community shrines, although rarely to large temples. Typically these sculptures, ordered from local potters, represent those animals (horses, cows, or elephants) that tradition states are of particular interest to the deity. Many believe that the sculptures are transformed into their real counterparts in the spirit world for the deity's own use.

Once the deity is suitably prepared for worship, the puja begins. Fire is an essential part of all Hindu rituals. Lamps (*deepas*) are lighted during a puja and waved clockwise in front of the image with the right hand, first around its head, then around its central portion, and finally around its feet. The left hand of the priest or person conducting the puja usually holds a small bell that is rung continuously while

the lamp is being waved. Fire was worshipped in ancient India as the God Agni, and today fire is a primary symbol of divine energy. In lighting the flame in front of the image the devotee acknowledges the sacred supremacy of the God or Goddess. Various vegetable oils may be used in deepas, but the most auspicious fuel is *ghee*, or clarified butter. Most lamps are brass, and many are sculpted with sacred symbols relevant to the deity being worshipped. Camphor, known locally as *karpura*, is processed from the pitch of the camphor tree. When lighted, it has the unique property of creating a bright, cool flame that leaves no residue or ash. It is usually placed in a flat tray known as an *arati*. After being waved in front of the image, the arati is customarily brought close to the devotees so that they may put their hands into the fire and then touch their eyelids or the tops of their heads with their fingertips, an action with great symbolic value. The fragrant flame represents the brilliant presence of the deity. Contact with the fire is believed to purify and elevate the devotee's soul, allowing it to merge with the magnificence of the Divine; at the same time, the energy of the absolute unknowable deity is transformed and channeled into palpable connection with the devotee. The arati puja and the darshan (the moment of visually recognizing and being recognized by God) are the most important acts in Hindu worship. (See figure C at the Web site <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/vasu/loh/>.)

The arati is usually directly followed by the dispersion of water to the worshipper. A small brass container of holy water blessed by the deity is brought out of the sanctum. A spoonful is poured into the cupped right hand of the devotee, who drinks it and then rubs the remaining drops through his or her hair, thereby melding both the inside and the outside of the body with the essence of the Divine. It is again an acknowledgment of the complement of opposites, the two primary elements: fire (masculine) and water (feminine), like the early morning prayers to the river and the rising sun.

According to ancient Indian philosophy, the human body is divided into seven vortices of energy, called *chakras*, beginning at the base of the spine and ending at the top of the head. The sixth chakra, also known as the third eye, is centered in the forehead directly between the eyebrows and is believed to be the channel through which humankind opens spiritually to the Divine. At the end of each puja ceremony the devotee marks this chakra with sacred powder, usually either *kumkum* (vermilion) or vibhuti, or with a paste made of clay or sandalwood as a symbol and reminder of the darshan. The mark, or *tilak*, is a public proclamation of one's devotion and may identify a specific spiritual affiliation. Most common is a simple dot of bright vermilion that symbolizes the Shakti of the deity. Worshipers of Vishnu use

white clay to apply two vertical lines joined at the base and intersected by a bright red streak. The white lines represent the footprint of their God, while the red refers to his consort, Lakshmi. Devotees of Shiva customarily draw three horizontal lines across their brows with vibhuti, symbolizing the three levels of existence and the three functions of their Lord as Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer of all existence. A married woman in some parts of India may be identified by the vermilion used in her tilak and in the part of her hair. Contrary to popular belief outside of India, the *bindi*, or beauty mark, that modern Indian women and girls put on their foreheads has no other contemporary significance, although it evolved from these symbolic tilaks. It does not refer to caste, community, or marital status.

After the symbolic purification with fire, the drinking of holy water, and the marking of the third eye, the final act in most pujas is the return to the devotee of some of the flowers and the newly blessed food, called *prashad*. In the household, all the prashad will be consumed by family members. Some of the food remains in the temple as payment to the priests who facilitate the rituals, while the remaining prashad is taken home and eaten. Hindus believe that the ingestion of prashad fills them with the divine energy of the deity to whom they have prayed, in the same way that Christians believe that by partaking of the bread and wine in Holy Communion they accept the spirit of Christ into their bodies. While pujas may be made either before or after meals, depending on family tradition, all food that is cooked in the home must first be symbolically offered to the Gods before it is eaten. In the strictly traditional home the cook will not even taste the food while it is being prepared, as that would alter the purity of the offering. Consequently, all food cooked in these homes becomes prashad. The kitchen is therefore considered a sacred space that should not be violated by uncleanness or by impure actions, words, or thoughts.