

Hinduism practices and beliefs



- Charla Y. Jacobs

A Glimpse into the Unfamiliar: *Hinduism*

Hinduism is a religion that is multi-faceted. It is *polytheistic* ; meaning its followers believe in many gods. Along with this religions many facets, there are also numerous sacred elements that its followers observe and practice. This religion even entails followers worshipping different gods (idols), during the same worship service. Because of Hinduism’s many details, I wanted to observe and experience its worship services and beliefs. I chose to visit *BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir Temple located in Lilburn, GA* . A *Mandir* is a Hindu place of worship, considered to be a spiritual haven and a place of phenomenal peace. It is also viewed as a center of vibrant cultural, social and spiritual activity. Hindu religious services have many different practices/rituals, numerous overt elements of religious expression and the congregation is extremely involved in the service.

Hindu religious services have many different practices and rituals. Before visiting the temple, I called to get information about visiting hours, specific dress codes/service attire, as well as whether or not any of the service would be presented in English. After being told that the services are conducted entirely in the Hindu language, I knew I needed to do some outside research of my own, specifically as it relates to Hindus’ practices and rituals. Hinduism is considered to be one of the oldest religions in the world, as it has no known founder or creator, such as that of Christianity, Buddhism and many other religions. Because of its many varied expressions of worship and beliefs, many people think that Hindu practices and beliefs are individually customized.

While conducting my research, I learned that Hinduism has four main denominations – Saivism, Shaktism, Smartism and Vaishnavism. When I called the temple to inquire about rules and regulations for visitors, I was informed that the temple only allowed visitors on certain days and times. The day of your visit, determines the type of worship service you will observe/experience. My visit was on a Thursday, and from what I could determine, the worship service seemed to focus on the *Smartism* denomination.

Smartas as followers of this denomination are called, worship god (the supreme being) in one of six forms. Ganesha, Sakti, Vishnu, Siva, Skanda and Surya. Because smartas accept all the major Hindu gods, they are known as nonsectarian and liberal in their beliefs. They follow a meditative path that is thoughtful and philosophical, encouraging human beings oneness with god through understanding his/her nature. From what I could gather/understand during the service, the gods/idols being worshipped could have been either male or female.

Hindu worship services seem to explode with numerous, overt elements of religious expression starting with the landscaping of the temple grounds, to the astounding architecture of the temple itself, all the way to the artwork and interior design of the temple – nothing short of amazing! One of the most beautiful places I've ever seen in my life! I drive by this temple every afternoon on my way to school or on my way home from work. It is a very, large, beautiful and gated structure, appearing as if it was taken out of India and dropped into its present location; so I guess you could say it really gets

lots of passerby attention because it looks as if it doesn't belong in this country!

During my research I learned that this temple, the Baps Shri Swaminarayan Mandir was opened in August of 2007, after only 17 short months of construction. It is composed of three types of stone (Indian pink sandstone, Italian marble and Turkish limestone). Over 34, 000 pieces were carved by hand in India and shipped to the USA, to be assemble in Lilburn, GA; much like a giant, 3-D jigsaw puzzle.

Upon entering the temple, with its lush carpet of many beautiful, rich colors, I noticed that there were no chairs. Everyone was expected to sit on the floor, in a seating apparatus that resembled a chair without legs, but did provide support for your back. The women were dressed in Saris (decorative robes/gowns) were seated separately from the men, who were dressed in robes of navy blue and black. Unlike Christianity, I did not witness any physical display of fellowship, like hugging and/or handshaking, as is customary in Christianity and many other religions. There were six very beautiful and ornately decorated statues that sat maybe two to three feet apart on a large and extremely beautiful, decorative altar/stage with colorful flowers and plants, as well as different, richly-colored materials and wall hangings.

After I removed my shoes, I was lead to a visitors' area, as non-Hindu believers/visitors were only allowed to observe from a distance on this particular day. Also, there is/was an \$11. 50 cost associated with visiting this temple. That in itself is very different than my own belief, which is

Christianity. I've never been charged an admission fee to visit any church, nonetheless, I was very curious. My research also revealed that the Hindu worship service is known as *Puja*, meaning adoration.

The service started off very quiet, with only soft music playing while the worship leader, known as the *Pujari*, purified himself by washing his hands, feet and face with what I assume was holy water. He then begins to chant, along with using many different hand gestures and singing what appeared to be hymns to the six ornate statues/gods that are on the stage. He proceeds to lay various gifts such as food, oils and perfumes, as what I presume were offerings in front of each statue/idol. There are also bells being rang in the midst of all this activity. I understood this to be the way Hindus beckon the deities/gods to come and dwell among the people in the service. And then there was the lighting of many candles and oil lamps, as well as some sort of holy water being poured over the statues. While all this is going on, the congregants/worshippers are bowed down or lying prostrate in prayer. All of this lasted for about 45 minutes to an hour. The Pujari then reads from a group of sacred Hindu writings known as *Vedas (subchapters)*, which comes from a Hindu Bible, which is called the *Shruti* for about 30 minutes.

The congregation is extremely involved in the service; even more so after all of the “ ritualistic” and formal parts of the service are concluded. After the reading from the Shruti has been completed, the congregants/worshippers rise from their seated and praying positions. They begin to dance and sing, while lots of loud and festive music is being played, some from instruments that I didn't recognize – seemingly the music consists of horns, symbols, bells, drums and Hindu chanting.

Because the practice/religion of Hinduism is so varied and multi-faceted, there is so much more to experience and learn about it than just one visit will allow. I did not like the fact that I had to pay an admission price to visit a place of worship. That part alone, was sort of a turn off and made the whole experience seem unreal as far as worship services go. However, the surroundings, in and outside of the temple were so beautiful that it did evoke a sense of peace, calm and balance that may not likely be found anywhere else. I would definitely consider visiting on another day of the week where visitors may be a more participatory than observatory part of the service.