

Theme 4A Religious practices that shape religious identity: Puja in the home and the mandir

Key concepts

- Puja is a Sanskrit word which, loosely translated, means reverence or worship and refers to the worship Hindus perform daily. Puja can include a wide range of activities and practices, some of which are performed individually, some congregationally and many can be both. All can also be performed at home as well as in the temple.
- Puja in the home is the most popular form of puja. It is usually conducted by the most senior woman in the household. A Hindu home will have a shrine and in other parts of the home there could be murtis or pictures of the deities. Most puja usually includes bathing and dressing the deity and the offering of various items to the deity.
- Most Hindus call at their local mandir whenever possible. There are many kinds of temples, but all will have three main features: a murti or symbol of the deity, a canopy over the deity in order to honour it and a priest to care for the sacred image and to give each worshipper prasada, a gift from the deity. The relationship between devotees and deities is personal. Devotional Hinduism is based on the love of the devotee for God.
- Darshan comes from the Sanskrit, darsana, which means sight or vision. The experience opens the heart and gives peace, blessings and divine energy or shakti. At the moment of darshan the entire focus of the devotee is absorbed in the image of the deity and Hindus believe that the person who receives darshan is also seen by the deity.
- Pradakshina, the Sanskrit word for circumambulation, literally means 'to the right'. Therefore, devotees walk around the garbha griha, the innermost chamber of the shrine, keeping the shrine on their right. It expresses the belief that God is the centre of existence, and your thoughts and actions should always be centred on God.
- The word prasada means 'that which gives peace' and refers to the food Hindus offer to God during any form of worship, ritual or ceremony. After they have been offered, they are shared between the devotees, either at home or in the temple, so that they receive the blessings of the deities.
- Hindus usually conduct puja in shrines in three types of places: at home, in a temple or outside shrines. However, within Hinduism there is some debate on the relative importance of personal and congregational puja.

Key quotes

"An essential aspect of puja for Hindus is communion with the Divine... Most often that contact is facilitated through an image: an element of nature, a sculpture, vessel, painting, or print. When the image is consecrated at the time of its installation in a shrine or temple, the deity is invited to invest the image with his or her cosmic energy. In the eyes of most devotees, the icon then becomes the deity, its presence reaffirmed by the daily rituals of honoring and invocation." (Stephen P. Huyler in Meeting God)

"Although the home has been considered the focal point for most ceremonies many Hindus call at their local temple, the mandir, whenever possible." (Jeaneane Fowler)

"Hindu temples are not really designed for congregational worship but for meetings between individual devotees and the deities from which they wish to receive darshan." (Ian Jamieson)

"One more important thing to note here is that darshan is not simply a matter of viewing the Deity in the temple, but to one who is spiritually realized it is a matter of experiencing the Deity and entering into a personal, reciprocal exchange with the Supreme Personality in the form of the Deity." (V. A. Ponnemilil)

Key words

puja	mandir	murti	deity	shrine
darshan	prasada	personal	shakti	pradakshina
congregational	garbha griha			

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that home puja is more intimate and personal. Others argue that Hindu temples bring dispersed Hindu communities together. Some would argue that home and temple puja are very important and significant in Hinduism and in the everyday lives of Hindus.

Key questions

- Is puja a religious experience?
- Is puja in the home more important than puja in the mandir?
- Is puja the most important practice in Hinduism?