

Visits to a Religious Site # Hindu Temple

I was unable to obtain entry to a Hindu Temple in New York. I was able to watch a YouTube video from the Hindu Temple Society of North American, New York City of the Śri Ganeša Chaturthi Nava Dina Brahmotsavam Day 9. The Hindu Temple Society of North America was started in New York in 1970. The society acquired a building, a non functioning Russian Othodox church. “The Temple, traditionally known as Śri Mahā Vallabha Ganapati Devasthānam, has established a Hindu Religious and Cultural Center Complex on Bowne Street. This street was named after John Bowne, a distinguished American who strove for religious freedom and anti-slavery movement. This was the first authentic Hindu Temple in North America built with traditional granite stones imported from India; and so is one of the most historically and architecturally important Temples in the West. The Temple has recently expanded, more than doubling in size.”

There was music playing, percussion and a string instrument. In the front of the room there were five altars. Facing them, the one on the left looked like a silver swan. On top of it were flowers, garland and ornaments. Next to it was a silver cow, it too was adorned with flowers, garland and ornaments in the center was a wooden altar. On it was the Ganeša also adorned with flowers, garland and ornaments. The Ganeša is one of the best known and widely recognized Hindu deities. Next was a large silver bird of prey, an eagle or falcon, adorned with flowers, garland and ornaments. The last was a silver vase filled with flowers, garland and ornaments.

I later learned that the swan or hamsa is the vehicle for the goddess Saraswati. The cow is the Kamadhenu or the divine bovine, also known as Surabhi. The Ganeša is depicted with an

elephant's head, human body and four arms. The eagle-like sunbird is the Garuda and is the king of birds. The bowl is known as a Pooja bowl.

Perpendicular to the five altars at the front of the room on the floor, was a row of trays and bowls with fruits, spices, flowers, oils. Four men sat on the floor, two on either side of the array of food and other items on the floor wearing traditional hindu priestly clothing. It was all white with some hints of red or yellow giving the appearance that they were wearing orange. One man was almost completely bare chested. Two of the men had microphones and were chanting, sometimes in unison and sometimes in call and response. The interpreter explained that we were witnessing the Sri Siddhi-Buddhi Sri Maha Ganapati. Then he went on to explain that marriage or the Vivaah is one of the sixteen Sanskara that an individual can participate in. Marriage is a social institution and the regulation of proper relationships.

There are 8 types of marriages, Brahma Vivaah, considered the religious wedding where the father proposes marriage to another man's daughter to his son. The Daiva Vivaah, this is when the father offers his daughter to the priest at the temple with a sacrificial fee. Arsha Vivaah, the groom gives a cow or a bull to the father in exchange for the daughter. Prajapatya Vivaah, is similar to the Brahma Vivaah except the bride's father gives her as the groom's father to marry his son when they are mature enough. This is usually done when the children are very young. Gandharva Vivaah, is where the couple agrees to marry by mutual consent. Asura Vivaah, the groom offers a dowry to the father of the bride. This is frowned upon because it seems like they are marrying for money. The last two are inappropriate and religiously forbidden. First, Rakshasa Vivaah, is when the groom abducts the bride against her will or when the girl is willing but the family objects. He can be abducted and married. Lastly, Paishacha Vivaah is when a man forces himself upon a woman when she is drugged, possessed or

unconscious. Today we will be witnessing the ritual of the Daiva Viviaah. This is when the father offers his daughter to the priest at the temple with a sacrificial fee. This is usually done when a daughter has not been married several years after reaching puberty.

The four men continued to perform rituals of chanting and arranging the elements on the floor in the sacred area. The next part of the ritual was to offer clothing and flowers to the deity. Every grand festival this offering is given from the faithful. Next was the purification of bodily elements. This involved more unified chanting and singing. Two of the men got up from their seated area and adorned the Ganeša with Flowers. Then the divine couple are offered milk and bananas. The men symbolically feed two smaller statues that are part of the Ganeša altar display. Then it is the covering of the colored rice balls, this is done as the men circle the Ganeša several times. Following that is the ritual that recognizes three generations of family from each side. There were ringing of bells and chanting.

For a short period of time a sheet blocked out the view of anything and we moved to another altar of Ganeša that was heavily adorned with garland called the Pushpa Alankaram Ganeša. There was more chanting and tossing of flowers by one of the men. He then held up a lamp with a flame and ceremonially waved it around the statue. Then he waved a shortlesment with animal hair. Afterward he held up what looked like a candelabra with multiple flames. He waved it around the Pushpa Alankaram Ganeša and then returned to the previous altar area to wave the candelabra around the five altars from earlier. They sang a song that was accompanied by other instruments. The song was “De Ganeša”

The Lyrics are:

*Jai Ganesh, jai Ganesh, jai Ganesh deva
Mata jaki Parvati, pita Mahadeva.*

*Ek dant dayavant, char bhuja dhari
Mathe par tilak sohe, muse ki savari
Pan chadhe, phul chadhe, aur chadhe meva
Ladduan ka bhog lage, sant kare seva.
Jai Ganesh, jai Ganesh, jai Ganesh deva,
Mata jaki Parvati, pita Mahadeva...
Andhan ko ankh det, kodhin ko kaya
Banjhan ko putra det, nirdhan ko maya
Surya shaam sharan aye, safal kije seva.
Jai Ganesh, jai Ganesh, jai Ganesh deva,
Mata jaki Parvati, Pita Mahadeva...*

English Translation of the Hindi Hymn

*Glory to you, O Lord Ganesha!
Born of Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, and the great Shiva.
O Lord of compassion, you have a single tusk, four arms,
A vermilion mark of on your forehead, and ride on a mouse.
People offer you betel leaves, blossoms, fruits
And sweets, while saints and seers worship you.
Glory to you, O Lord Ganesha!
Born of Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, and the great Shiva.
You bestow vision on the blind, chastened body on the leprous,
Children on the sterile, and wealth on the destitute.
We pray to thee day and night, please bestow success upon us.
Glory to you, O Lord Ganesha!
Born of Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, and the great Shiva.*

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