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Student perspectives on worship services from Instructor Jennifer Garvin-Sanchez's Religious Studies 108 Human Spirituality undergraduate course at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Hindu Center of Virginia

by Meagan Denton

The name of the temple I visited was the Hindu Center of Virginia. The temple is located at 6051 Springfield Road, Glen Allen, VA 23060. There is no denominational affiliation in Hinduism due to its polytheistic nature. I visited there on September 17, 2015 at 6:15 when prayer starts. The presiding official is the Priest of the temple and his name is Kannan but due to respect he is only known as the priest.

The temple is a rather large building with a creamish tan colored exterior. The front entrance of the temple faces the East to face the rising of the sun. The sides of the temple are decorated with typical Indian architectural designs based on symmetry the idea that everything is connected. Towards the back of the building is taller part of the roof and located at the top of it is a sacred relic that is also a symbol of unity. When you first enter the building you walk into a large room where shoes, coats, and it is where the restrooms are located. There are also tables set up where you can get offerings or special relics that can be used during puja (worship). As you continue on you walk into a corridor where wooden carvings of gods and goddesses are along the walls to mark that you are entering a sacred place. Once through, you are now in the main worship hall where all of the gods are located. The worship hall has a red colored carpet and tons of windows to allow in the natural lighting. The main god (Venkateswara) is located in center of all the gods.

In Hinduism, worship is considered an individual action and not a congregational act therefore, there is no formal way of greeting guest or anyone due to this. The majority of the community are Indian people. In the community there are different cultures and languages that are spoken. The people of the community are from different places all over India creating a diverse group of people. There are some other races as well but the majority of the population is Indian. The number of people differs due to its non-congregational nature.

I was comfortable attending because I went with my friend who goes to the temple. She explained things to me and guided me through the process. She explained to me what was going on and what things I needed to do in order to show respect. If I had gone by myself I wouldn't have had the same experience because no one essentially would know that I was new because the people differ per day and time.

In Hinduism there is no beginning or ending to a service and it's not really a service. Hinduism is more about personal experience with the gods and less focus is placed on a group encounter. The emotion of the service is peaceful as they play devotional chants and religious songs in the background. The actual individual participation is very ritualistic. Upon entering the temple, devotees go to

the main god to pray and can then continue on to pray to the other gods. Others who are devoted to a specific god would go to that idol and pray to that god. After praying, there are bowls filled with a red earthy powder located at each idol. Once your prayer is finished you would dip your ring finger into the bowl and then place your finger on your forehead to put the power on there. This powder represents a sign of blessing from the gods and spiritual intelligence. The red powder is used for women and there is also a grey powder that the men would use. If a lot of people are present then the priest will light oil called aarti and ring bells. After that it is then walked around by the priest to the devotees. The devotees will then will “take in” the oil by pouring it over your head. The pouring of the oil is not actual pouring its more of a gesture to symbolize the pouring. This is another form of offering to the gods. After the oil, holy water is distributed by the priest to the devotees. Some type of small sweet foods are then passed out as well, also another form of offering to the gods.

There is no symbolic art in Hindu temples but there are symbolic images. These images are images of the gods. The gods are dressed in fabric, flowers, and holy threads. The gods are also bathed during specific occasions or special religious holidays with milk, clarified butter, oil, and honey. Sometimes all of them are used and sometimes only one or a few are used depending on the specific ritual taking place. •

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