

### Visit to a Hindu Temple

For my paper this week I chose to visit a Hindu Temple in Albuquerque. It was very interesting because I didn't even know that Albuquerque had a Hindu temple so I was excited to be able to experience it because it is so different to what I am used to. I looked up "Hindu Temple in Albuquerque" on the internet and found a website for the "Hindu Temple Society of New Mexico." On their website they mentioned that the temple was open every Saturday evening for Hanuman Chalisa recital, so I had planned on going to that. It mentioned that you should call before you go, to see if the temple is open, so when I called the man I talked to said that it was about to close, because for some reason I thought the recital was at five instead of four. So I introduced myself and explained that I was studying Hinduism and asked if the Temple was open another time for me to visit, and he mentioned that it was open in the morning for a service at ten.

When I first drove up to the temple it looked like an ordinary building. From the outside you couldn't even tell that it was a temple. It was a square, two-story building, which I heard from a member later, used to be an old bank. The parking lot was all around the building and the parking lot was fenced in with an iron fence, with two gates on each side to let cars. When I entered the building, there was a small foyer with shelves covering the walls, and there was a sign asking for everyone to take off their shoes before entering any further into the building. I liked this, because it was a reminder that this was a sacred building and it needed to be treated reverently, by both adults and the children that were there. After I took off my shoes, I entered a large room in the main part of the building. In the room there were chairs that were along the outside of the room against the wall. On the walls there were pretty tapestries or fabrics that were arranged in a fan shape that made the room very colorful and bright. Against the main back wall there were three shrines made out of wood, and in each shrine there was a different God or Goddess inside, covered in fabric and flowers. Along the walls there were various doors leading to rooms, some being classrooms and a couple were labeled as meditation rooms, though the doors were closed so I couldn't see inside them.

When I first entered the room, there were already some members of the congregation who were sitting cross-legged on the floor near the base of the shrines, and they were arranging flowers into various trays, along with lighting incense. A woman member of the congregation came up to me and introduced herself to me. She was very nice and explained what was going to happen in the service to come. I came on a very important day because they were having a special service called "Lakshmi Pooja." It is a service that they have once a year and members of the congregation donate money for the service and for the meal that is held afterwards for anyone who comes. She showed me who the priest was, as he was lighting incense and oil which the member who was talking to me said was camphor oil. I am not sure if he is really called a priest or if she referred to him as a priest so I could better understand his role, since I am guessing she assumed I was some sort of Christian.

The members were sitting on pretty, oriental-style rugs and in the center of the rugs there was a long white runner, where the trays of incense and flowers etc., were placed, and then people sat cross-legged on either side of the white runner. I really enjoyed the outfits that the women wore. They were the traditional Indian Saris that were all brightly colored and covered with gems and mirrors and embroidery. Most of the men wore regular khakis and nice shirts, though some of them wore pants with long shirts, down to their knees. Even some of the smaller female children that were there wore silk skirts and matching shirts that had bright patterns and embroidery on them.

When the service began, the priest began to speak in an Indian language, in a chant/sing-song way, and the room was full of smoke and incense. After he spoke for a while, he began to pass a tray of rose petals around to everyone. One of the women told me that you always take what is offered to you with your right hand. She explained that in India and in Hindu culture, people use their left hand when they use the restroom, and so in public or in church, the right hand is always the correct hand to use. After everyone received the rose petals, the priest continued to speak. After he spoke for a little longer, he passed out a bag that held yellow rice kernels, and once again everyone took a small amount with their right hand. After this, everyone was asked to stand, and the priest spoke again while everyone was standing. I couldn't understand what he was saying, though I did hear him say Albuquerque a couple times, so I assume he was mentioning the community.

Everyone was then asked to sit down and the priest continued to speak. Every once in a while some people would reach forward towards the runner where the priest was sitting, and once I saw a woman pour water into a man's hands, but it was difficult to see where I was sitting, so I am not sure exactly what happened. Then another man got up and brought around a tray that was full of beautiful flowers, and each person picked up a flower. When everyone received a flower, the priest asked us to stand once again and everyone began to turn in a circle, turning to the right, and were praying and chanting. Some members got down on their hands and knees and bowed and prayed to the altar, while I saw one man actually lie down on his stomach and stretch his arms out in front of himself to pray. After doing the circling

movement, everyone began walking toward the front of the room and placed their flower on a pretty silver tray that had incense burning in the center.

After this, the priest spoke and he spoke in English and was talking about how we, as members, needed to focus on bettering ourselves, our family, and also our community, both the Hindu community and the community of Albuquerque. After he spoke about this for a while, he had everyone stand and he had a small container filled with a red dye of sorts, and everyone gathered around him, and he gave each person a sort of prayer and then took the dye and marked their forehead. After everyone had received their prayer and mark, they sang some hymns, while the priest blew into a sort of horn, and people rang bells, and then the service was over.

I really enjoyed attending this service. All of the members, especially the one woman, were very kind and open to speaking to me, and did a wonderful job explaining everything, like what would happen, who the priest was, what hand to use, etc. All of the churches I have been to have been more strict about sitting in chairs and being very formal, with certain procedures etc., and by participating in this, I felt that it was much more relaxed and open and in a way less judgmental. One of the women I talked to mentioned that Hindus believe that everyone has the right to believe in, and worship, what and whom they want. She said the only thing that is important is that each person lives the best life that they can lead, and it does not matter how they get there, so I really liked that. She also told me that they do not focus on peoples' sins. She said that all people sin in their life and so they believe more in doing what you can to make yourself better, rather than focus on the sins you may have done in your life. It made me feel very accepted. Overall, I had a great experience visiting the Hindu temple.