

# The Significant Role of **TEMPLES** & Religious Institutions

*“The Mandirs have to play a significant role in the growth of the Hindu community in terms of its capacity to uphold Hindu Dharma...”*

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*“We need to make temples not just a center of rituals and congregation but lighthouses of philosophy and knowledge, which are the basis of Hindu Dharma...”*

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*“Creating an environment where the youth understand, appreciate and love their Hindu culture is a crucial need today, as is uniting all Hindu temples under one umbrella...”*

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### **BENEDICTION**

Swami Jyotirmayananda has a great commitment to any initiative for the preservation through dissemination of knowledge of Hindu Dharma. In various conferences he had presented papers discussing on various topics concerning our dharma. This booklet contains his paper which throws light upon various topics for strengthening the Hindu community through the temples. I thank him for this valuable contribution.

Dayananda

# THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE OF TEMPLES & RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

*“The Mandirs have to play a significant role in the growth of the Hindu community in terms of its capacity to uphold Hindu Dharma.”*

-- SWAMI DAYANANDA SARASWATI ([www.arshavidya.org](http://www.arshavidya.org))

*“We need to make temples not just a center of rituals and congregation but lighthouses of philosophy and knowledge, which are the basis of Hindu Dharma.”*

-- SRI SRI RAVI SHANKAR ([www.artofliving.org](http://www.artofliving.org))

*“Creating an environment where the youth understand, appreciate and love their Hindu culture is a crucial need today, as is uniting all Hindu temples under one umbrella.”*

-- SWAMI CHIDANANDA SARASWATI ([www.parmarth.com](http://www.parmarth.com))

In recent times there has been much interest in an intensive study of different aspects of Hindu Dharma the world over. Scholars of modern times are examining from various angles several aspects of temple worship such as its rationale, significance, and the role of temples in social context. In this paper, an attempt has been made for a coordinated presentation of these views in order to promote a comprehensive understanding of this vital subject.

## **Temple is an altar of worship:**

It is worthwhile to begin with a significant quotation from Swami Dayananda Saraswati that highlights the role of temples and the present need of the modern world to make temple worship a very meaningful practice. Distinguishing temple -- an altar of worship -- from that of other congregational places, Pujya Swamiji points out: “A temple is unlike a church or a mosque. The church belongs to a parish, which has a priest in charge of the parish and a congregation. Once a week people come together there for worship; so it is a place of assembly, of congregation, and collective prayer. And they have some ritual also. A mosque is also a place for collective prayer. Once a week they all assemble for that. But the temple is an altar of worship and therefore people come at different times, during the day, offer their worship, and go. In Tirupathi, for instance, you can stand before the deity for only half a minute. You wait in the queue for *darshan* and it takes only one or two minutes. That is the *darshan*. It is over. The

man has been waiting for that for one day in the queue...It is *darshan*, because it is an altar of worship.”

### **Need for collective prayer and participation:**

“That was fine in olden days. These days you have to add to your temple a hall of congregation for prayer, not a community hall. If you want to have a community hall you can add another hall. But you need to have a hall of congregation for collective prayer. This is very important. Every temple has to evolve a certain simple form of collective prayer, and provide an explanation of it. If you don’t know, please read and find out so that you have a proper understanding of the meanings. It is collective prayer that is needed. The priest doing *puja* etc. is fine, but that is not enough. These days that alone won’t work in preserving our *dharma* because there is no participation.

“If you want your children to come back to the temple, please find out the meanings of all these forms and prayers. There are people here who have been running temples in this country (U.S.A.) for more than twenty years, whose children, when they were young, went to the temples along with their parents. Now they are in college, or perhaps working. Do they come voluntarily to the temples? They don’t, I know it very well. And their children will not. How will they come, when their parents don’t go? Right in your lifetime you have seen this; you have to acknowledge it. Why? Because there is no participation. They have to participate, and for that there should be a collective prayer and the meaning of it should be made known. For every word the meaning must be there, it must be simple, a few lines, not something elaborate. They should be able to come and pray and leave. The altar is there and the prayer is collective.” (<http://tinyurl.com/2mpe4k>)

### **Unknowingly belittling a profound form of worship:**

Temples are places of worship where *murti-puja* is performed invoking the Divine. When a Christian, a Muslim or an uninformed West-oriented scholar terms this as “idol worship”, he is giving it a derogatory implication being ignorant of its profound significance and rationale. For such Christians and Muslims, who are ignorant of its significance, *murti-puja* is nothing more than the demonic worship of “idols”. The atheistic academicians, who are equally ignorant of the physical, psychological and spiritual factors involved in

*murti-puja*, consider it as an expression of primitive superstition. Therefore, when we too refer to it as “idol worship”, we are also unknowingly belittling this profound form of worship which is an effective medium to be in communion with the Divine.

**Stop using the terminology of the antagonists to describe our Dharma:**

“Consequently, the use of inaccurate, and often consciously and maliciously distorted, terminology”, says Dr. Frank Morales (<http://tinyurl.com/4a4bdu>), “has been a double-edged source of oppressive discourse. Such terms have been made use of by an intellectually lethargic tradition of South Asian scholars who view the Sanatana Dharma, not as the noble living tradition that it is, but as their personal academic plaything. On the other hand, Hindus themselves blindly accept these non-indigenous and inaccurate terms, and unknowingly adopt them as their own. Thus, while the bulk of the blame must be placed squarely on the shoulders of the oppressors, the victims too need to free themselves of a colonialist-induced mentality of inferiority and acceptance of their oppression. It is my fervent hope that we followers of Sanatana Dharma will stop using the terminology of our antagonists to describe our religion. We must begin to call our religion by its true name: ‘Sanatana Dharma’. We must never use the words ‘idol’ and ‘mythology’ to describe our *murtis* and sacred stories again. We must reclaim our heritage. Such positive change might come about slowly, one person at a time. Every revolution, however, begins with thoroughly grasping the power of the word.” (<http://tinyurl.com/4aq7j6>)

**The Hindu concept of God vis-à-vis that of the Semitic theologians:**

In the context of temple worship, it is also worth examining the difference between the concept of God of the Semitic theologians and that of the Hindu Dharma. These points, well-highlighted by Swami Devananda Saraswati, (<http://hamsa.org/>) are given below, supplemented by my views:

The Christian concept of God is that He is a Creator separate from His creation, sitting somewhere far away, behind and beyond the clouds, not easily accessible to us, the poor mortals. But the Hindu concept is that not only God exists, but whatever exists is God only, in fact, God only IS, and He is immanent in everything and is beyond everything as well.

Hindus do not believe that there is only one God. Hindus believe that God is One, i.e. a unity inclusive of all things, manifest and unmanifest. This is quite different from saying there is only one God (though Westernized sloppy thinkers may not agree). To say that there is only one God is to reduce God to a single unit, to the lowest common denominator. This is what monotheists do. For them God is a unit, not a Unity.

Hindus are not monotheists, and Hindus are not polytheists. Hindus are panentheists, i.e. they believe that God is in all things and that all things are in God: God is everything, God is in everything, and everything is in God only. They believe the whole of creation is the body (actually, the manifestation) of God Who is the One Infinite-Eternal-Existence, and cannot be separated from God.

Monotheists believe God exists “someplace” outside of His creation. To them God is formless but has a location and that he is male! But to Hindus God is not only the efficient cause but also the material cause of the entire creation and He transcends everything, seen and unseen, and as such He is the *Ishwara*. The English word “God” can not convey all this. So it is better that we use the word *Ishwara* than the English word “God” which carries along with it a tint of an anthropomorphic view of the Semitic theology.

The great marvel of Hindu panentheism is that it allows the devotee to raise his or her favorite name and form of *Ishta Devata* (the Chosen Deity) to an absolute position. Therefore, for the devotee of Ganesha, Ganesha is the Supreme Lord (the Godhead) of All, and for the devotee of Devi, Devi is the Supreme Divine Mother of All, and for the devotee of Krishna, Krishna is the Supreme Lord (the Godhead) of All, and for the devotee of Shiva, Shiva is the Supreme Lord (the Godhead) of All, and so on for the other Divine manifestations. Thus, *Ishwara*, for the Hindus, can be adored not only as the ‘Father’ and the ‘Mother’, but the ‘Friend’ and even the ‘Beloved’ as well.

All names and forms are of the One only, (i.e. the one without a second, *advaya*). By definition, the One must include the “one God” of the monotheists, though the One is much more than the “one God” of these theological simpletons who seem to think that His one and the only occupation is creation, sitting as he is, the judgmental and the silvery bearded one, far off, somewhere behind and beyond the

clouds, not easily accessible to the poor mortals, and busily engaged in promoting heaven-going tourism for them after their one and the only earthly sojourn!

*Ishwara* is essentially *nirguna* (attributeless), *niraakara* (*formless*) and *nirvikaara* (immutable), in His static aspect as the Pure Consciousness which is the One Infinite-Eternal-Existence -- *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute). And in His dynamic aspect He is the *Shakti*, the infinite Power, inherent in all names and forms. In His immanent aspect He alone has become everything, manifest or unmanifest, and He also transcends everything, while at the same time being the indwelling spirit or consciousness in all names and forms, and therefore every soul being potentially divine, no one is born with the so-called 'original sin.' Every one, being the child of *Ishwara*, is the heir to immortal bliss. And, *Ishwara* reveals Himself to the one who chooses Him with a firm conviction, endowed with steadfastness, unflinching devotion and burning aspiration. And as such, no intermediary or an agent, like a prophet or saviour is necessary except the *guru*, the guide, who is also His manifestation, who helps just as a signpost does.

Hindus are often intimidated by Muslims and Christians who claim their "one God" concept is superior. It is not. In fact, it is very much an inferior concept. According to Dalai Lama, the idea of "one God" is ridiculous (<http://tinyurl.com/4sn5nl>).

### **Panentheism, the only term in English to describe Hindu Dharma and especially Hindu modes of worship:**

To recapitulate, the following is the accepted meaning of panentheism: Panentheism is the view that the universe is part of the being of God (*Ishwara*). Panentheism holds that God pervades the world, but is also beyond it. He is immanent and transcendent, relative and Absolute. This embracing of opposites is called dipolar. For the panentheist, God is in all, and all is in God. The one God interpenetrates every part of nature, and timelessly extends beyond as well. God is viewed as creator and/or animating force behind the universe and the source of universal truth.

As Swami Devananda Saraswati, whose comments are given above, has rightly pointed out: "Though it may have its limitations, it (panentheism) is really the only term in English to describe Hinduism and especially Hindu modes of worship which allows the devotee to raise his *Ishta Devata* to the position of Godhead."



“The real problem is with the English language which reflects Christian theology in all its terms and usage. Panentheism is, of course, a term brought into English from the Pagan Greek which is why it can more truly reflect Hindu concepts.

“Hindus are also pantheists and in its deepest sense there is no problem with meaning except that for the English user the term simply means nature worship. The term has been degraded by centuries of Christian theology and ridicule, and again the bigger problem is that the English language reflects Christian concepts in all its terminology.

“The truth is that to understand Hindu concepts and ideas, we have to have a working knowledge of Sanskrit. But as that is not possible for many of us today, we do the best we can with English. Today, English is the language we have to use to convey Hindu ideas to the educated general public, especially for Hindus residing outside of India”.

So, it must be clear that while the Christian theology holds God as separate from His creation (extra-cosmic), according to Hindu Dharma *Ishwara* is not only the efficient cause but also the material cause of the entire creation. He interpenetrates the whole creation and is beyond (transcendent) as well. To consider *Ishwara* like a potter separate from his creation (pot) is infantile. As already pointed out, the English word “God” conveys an anthropomorphic conception of the Semitic theology and hence not suitable for our purpose. We can better use the familiar word *Ishwara* who though essentially *nirguna* (attributeless), *niraakara* (formless) and *nirvikaara* (immutable), is manifest (immanent) in the form of the entire *jagat* (universe) of multifarious names and forms and still beyond everything (transcendent) and continues to be the indwelling consciousness in all names and forms.

In the light of what has been said above about *Ishwara* (not “God”), our constant prayer to Him can be, “You are everything; You are in everything, and everything is in You only. May I be aware of this fact every moment of my life, and may I abide in You, for ever and ever.”

### **A simple, three point program for translating the spiritual ideals into our daily life:**

To actualize the meaning of our above referred prayer, all that is needed is the employment of our threefold faculty in our day to day life, in and through our interaction with others, in the social context, and not divorced from it: 1) Employment

of our faculty of speech, 2) Employment of our faculty of thinking, & 3) Employment of our faculty of action.

The first one enables us to constantly remember *Ishwara* by taking His divine name (of our choice), as a result of which we are gradually led to constantly dwell on His divine attributes (2), and further, prompted to perform all our external activities as our loving adoration of *Ishwara*, in all his variegated names and forms before us (3). And, naturally, we enjoy working for Him, bringing forth in its trail excellence in our action, exuberance of compassion in our heart, stillness and peace in our mind, matched by our total dedication for the work in hand. If the first one is designated as *naama*, the second one is *dhyaana*, and the third one is *seva*. In this way, when we employ our faculty of speech as indicated above, it is nothing but *bhakti yoga*; when we employ our faculty of thinking, it is *jnaana yoga*, and when we employ our faculty of action it is *karma yoga*. So, knowingly or unknowingly, we are living *yoga* in our day to life, in and through our interaction with others and in our interpersonal life.

Thus, when these three faculties of ours are employed simultaneously, constantly and in our day to day life (in fact we are all doing this, knowingly or unknowingly, when, say, we walk along with someone even as we simultaneously talk and think) in and through our interaction with others in the society, gradually, as the non-dual awareness is constantly and continuously hammered, as it were, on our mind, we steadily get equipped for the knowledge for *Ishwara* -- "*knowledge by being*" (without the means or knowledge), as distinct from our normal knowledge of the world -- "*knowledge by seeing*" (by the means of knowledge). Of course, the outcome is commensurate with the intensity of our aspiration for this "*knowledge by being*". This "*Knowledge*" makes one exclaim in raptures: "Oh -- what joy it is to be conscious that *Ishwara*, the Supreme Being, is ever enthroned in my heart. I eternally dwell in Him and He lives in me eternally. *Ishwara* fills and permeates the entire universe. Every particle, every atom, is thrilling with divine music. The glow of His splendour illumines all. He is the inexhaustible spring of delight, peace and bliss. He is the infinite fountain of love and compassion. All glory to Him!"

## **Hindus can and should educate and guide the Hindu masses in temples:**

Writing in the context of the role of Hindu Temples in India, Prof. G. C. Asnani ([www.hinduvoice.net](http://www.hinduvoice.net)) says, 'Hindus can and should educate and guide the Hindu masses in temples'. He has a few points for consideration: "In India almost all Hindus go to a temple everyday or worship *Ishwara* in a corner of their house. Temple is a very natural and common place for Hindus coming together. It is a very relevant suggestion that temples should be used for strengthening Hindu society. All other religious communities in the world get guidance from their religious places – Christians from a Church on Sundays, Muslims from a Mosque on Fridays, etc. We Hindus can, and should, educate and guide the Hindu masses in temples at least once in a week on a suitable day (perhaps Sunday) of a week, when people are relatively free from their daily routine work.

"The Chief of the Hindu Temple or some other knowledgeable person with the permission of the temple authorities should devote a part of his religious sermon time, say 15 minutes out of one hour, highlighting the fact that Hindu Dharma has come under great danger as some concerted efforts are taking place to remove Hindu Dharma from Hindustan, in several ways including in the guise of the so-called secularism (which is in fact rabidly anti-Hinduism), it is the duty of persons in charge of a Hindu Temple to make efforts to protect Hindu Dharma.

"Normally, a Hindu religious teacher avoids this topic, claiming that he is not involved in politics. We need not advise the listener devotees in a temple, to vote for any particular politician or political party, but we should insist that a Hindu devotee of *Ishwara* should use his/her franchise in a democracy judiciously, and that he/she should vote for that person or party who can be trusted to protect Hindu Dharma. We should emphasize on 'Hindu Dharma' rather than on political party".

In this context, the "Tirupathi Declaration" (for its background details, vide page 7, at <http://tinyurl.com/2mpe4k>), jointly made by the prominent Hindu Dharma Acharyas assembled at Tirupathi (July 15, 2006), gains relevance and significance: "We Hindus assembled here declare that we do not support, directly or indirectly, any group, institution, religion, media, or political

force, which preaches, practices or works against Hindu Dharma in this country. We appeal to all the Hindus in this country and elsewhere to subscribe to and support this declaration, the 'Tirupathi Declaration'. We want all the Hindu religious endowments to be managed by Hindu bodies, and not by the government. We want the secular government to release all religious endowments from its hold."

Though a "Secular State has to Protect Every Religion Including Hinduism" (<http://tinyurl.com/63d9ub>), the travesty of the fact is that today the "Indian Governments Hard on Hindus, Their Temples, and Soft on All Others." (<http://tinyurl.com/e97b3>). Needless to say that this kind of perverted brand of 'secularism' (which is nothing but rabidly anti-Hinduism) that is being openly and shamelessly practiced and propagated by the present-day dispensation in India, is undermining and enervating Hindu Dharma and the society.

It is a sad irony that the Hindu Temples in India are under Government control; vide "Government Control of Hindu Temples in India -- A Blatant Violation of Secularism & Religious Freedom" (<http://tinyurl.com/547xea>). As rightly pointed out by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the Government Control is robbing the Hindu Temples of their cultural & religious vitality: "In India one of the key challenges Hindus face is Governmental control of and interference in the management of temples, which is robbing temples of their cultural and religious vitality. The funds contributed by ordinary Hindus out of their simple religious devotion are being diverted by the Governments for various purposes, without the consent and knowledge of the donors. The temples themselves are being deprived of funds for their upkeep and maintenance. Services to devotees and pilgrims, who often travel long distances, are suffering. The arts and culture promoted by temples are on the decline. Some of the money is also being used for anti-Hindu activities. We wish to urge Hindus all over the world to educate themselves on this crucial issue that affects their religious freedom, and to act to correct this situation." (<http://tinyurl.com/2mpe4k>).

### **Temples as centers of learning:**

From the ancient times temples have been functioning also as centers of learning. In this context the following observation of

Dr. M. G. Prasad ([www.taranga.us](http://www.taranga.us)) is significant regarding the scope of temples to impart education in the modern times: “The spiritual, philosophical and religious aspects of Sanatana Dharma are based on experiences of our *rishis*. They did not speculate. They provided knowledge behind various practical aspects. The *yoga* with all its different forms provided the practical basis. Thus it is very important that the *devaalaya* becomes the resource for knowledge. In addition to the ritualistic worship, simultaneous efforts should be made to give the knowledge behind the rituals. Either through the trained priests or knowledgeable volunteers, educational talks should be given to devotees during the rituals. Time should be allotted for questions and answers. Concepts such as the four hands of the *vighraha* representing the blessing of four-fold objectives, namely, *dharmā*, *artha*, *kaama* and *moksha* and the inseparable nature of masculine and feminine principles being worshipped as *deva* and *devi*, etc should be told. Classes should be held regularly to explain the meaning of the *mantras* chanted. In addition, regular classes are to be conducted to study scriptures such as *Bhagavad-Gita*, *Upanishads*, etc. In addition to the year-round classes, additional programs such as workshops, guest lectures, camps, etc are essential to educate both youngsters and adults. One of the reasons for youngsters not coming in large numbers to temples is due to lack of educational programs and youth related activities.”

### **The valuable roles that temples can play in the ethos of the Hindu community:**

Now, it is time to give special attention to remove the dross that has gathered around the Hindu traditions through the ages. It is these superficialities which the vested interests highlight to obscure the valuable roles that temples can play in the ethos of the Hindu community. The temples, religious institutions and cultural organizations can be effectively made to become the focal points for inculcation of awareness of the cultural traditions for the new generation. For this, first of all we have to clear the many misconceptions about temple worship amidst our youth. They should be adequately informed about the well-coordinated science evolved by the *rishis* of India based on subtle facts of evolution of the universe, the interconnections in the human life, universe and the Ultimate Reality. Once the new generation is educated

about these facts, they will discard the misconceptions that they may have acquired from the false propaganda against our spiritual traditions. Once that is accomplished, the Hindu youngsters will themselves become the best ambassadors of their cultural heritage.

Weekly and monthly classes on Sundays (to take advantage of the weekly holidays) can be held in temples intended for the new generation. Factual information about Indian history, the intellectual and spiritual explorations which have taken place from ancient times, traditional arts and sciences of India should be in the syllabi for such instructional sessions. In the beginning, most of our youth may not understand the information thus imparted from the viewpoint of the traditional logic of India's ancient methods of learning because of their mental conditioning by the west oriented scientific logic. However such efforts if undertaken by the Acharyas with a special talent for teaching, it is possible to remove all such impediments. Temples can and should establish suitable environments for discussing and exploring various aspects of the concepts of Dharma and its relevance to everyday life.

The temples should be maintained with utmost care for cleanliness and order. They should function as centres of solace and wisdom in every respect. The priests should be well trained, should have modern education, should be well-versed in traditional knowledge, be service-oriented and well-paid. They should at least have a modicum of knowledge of the Abrahamic faiths so that they can converse with inquiring westerners who come to our temples. There is much virtue and value if a practicing Hindu can share his or her own insight of Sanatana Dharma with a westerner just as the latter will often share his or her tradition with an Indian walking into a church or a mosque.

### **The special role temples can adopt overseas in initiating “inter-faith” dialogs with people of the Abrahamic faiths:**

Another special role, which the temples can adopt overseas, is in initiating “inter-faith” dialogs with people of the Abrahamic faiths, just as the latter do in the western countries. In recent years, Churches and Mosques have initiated interfaith meetings, often with an ulterior motive of identifying future prospects for possible conversion to their own faiths. While the Acharyas of our traditions have no mental reservations about attending such

meetings in churches or mosques or any place of worship, it is not often easy for people of Abrahamic faiths to visit our temples. They often have mental blocks about our places of worship because of the behavioural and intellectual conditioning that they have had through their western education, their parents and their religious teachers, about religions originating from the Hindu traditions. It is here that the religious traditions arising from Sanatana Dharma have greater advantage over the Abrahamic faiths since our traditions are devoid of such inhibitions and confer no special virtue on those who attract others to our spiritual traditions. No doubt, we also welcome those who want to earnestly explore our paths to self-knowledge. By ourselves initiating a monthly or quarterly inter-faith dialog sessions within the portals of our temples, we can perhaps dispel many misconceptions, which are spread by the adherents of Abrahamic faiths about our forms of worship and our religious traditions. We can also thus be effective communicators with our neighbors who are of the Abrahamic faiths.

**Modern man should develop a rational and scientific understanding of the use of temples:**

In this context, it is worthwhile to quote here a few lines from the book, *“Power in Temples -- A Modern Perspective”* ([www.integralbooks.com](http://www.integralbooks.com)) “Modern man should develop a rational and scientific understanding of the use of temples in refining his spiritual, mental and physical life. It is in the absence of such understanding that these institutions evolved by the sages to elevate man have often degenerated into centres of priest-craft and empty ritualism or business centres. A priest who just parrot-like recites some Sanskrit verses without any understanding of their content steep himself and others in ignorance. About people who just repeat scholastic lines to impress the gullible without knowing their inner significance, the *Rig-Veda* says, ‘Such people are like those who tend sterile cows feigning that they are tending milch cows.’ Rituals are meant to discipline the mind, to refine it and tune it to the higher facts. They give a sublime, artistic quality to worship. To that extent they are desirable. But when they are given more importance than the human factor itself, making them an end, they degenerate into empty ritualism.

“The priests should be well trained and well paid. Are we not paying psychiatrists a big sum even for a single consultation?”

Then why should we hesitate to provide a decent livelihood to priests and others who serve in temples, which help maintain the inner health of the society? On their part, the priests should equip themselves with modern education and specialization in ancient knowledge. They should be able to give spiritual solace to people and give them guidance.

“All those who are to be employed in temples should be carefully selected, for they should have special cultural ability to serve. They should reflect brightness, love and divine grace, which are the fundamental characteristics of the atmosphere in a temple.

“Those who do not have a philosophical bent of mind and faith in the greatness of their duty are unfit to be employed in temples. The vital purpose of the temple will be defeated if it is managed by the narrow-minded and the ignorant.

“As one spiritually advances, naturally the rituals become less important. Over-emphasis on ritualism is unhealthy. Medicine helps cure illness, but its overdose causes injury and if continued even after the cure, the same medicine may create further complications. Everything has to be examined and accepted with a balanced frame of mind. Blind acceptance and blind rejection are both irrational.”

Sri Ramakrishna highlights the great significance of temples thus: ‘Know that there must be manifestation of God in places where countless people have practised austerity. From time immemorial numerous devotees and men of realization have come to these holy places to have a vision of *Ishwara*. Therefore, *Ishwara* though equally present everywhere, manifests in temples in the same way as water though can be found anywhere by digging the ground, it is certain that one can find water more easily at the site of a tank or a lake’. So, let us maintain temples as a Spiritual Dynamo that bestows solace and strength to one and all.

**In temple, knowledge, devotion and service are blended into a harmonious whole:**

A temple is a place where *jnana* (knowledge), *bhakti* (devotion) and *karma* (service) are blended into a harmonious whole. A temple should be managed in such a way that all these three aspects are given expression. Young people should be trained as volunteers to promote a proper perspective about these vital aspects. For this purpose the authorities of the temples have to make themselves well informed about the



potentials of temples as spiritual and social institutions. All these areas need to be budgeted properly. It is well highlighted by the sages that temples provide an opportunity for all to progress in their spiritual development through serving the common cause, namely, *Ishwara*.

### **How the Hindu temples differ from the Christian churches or the mosques of the Muslims:**

It is an unfortunate fact that many devotees themselves are not sufficiently aware of how the Hindu temples differ from the Christian churches or the mosques of the Muslims. Churches and mosques do not have any deeper significance than being mere halls for mass prayer. On the other hand temples are vibrant centers of Divine energy. Even intelligent Hindus often fail to appreciate this vital distinguishing feature. In the words of Sri S. Gurumurthy (<http://gurumurthy.net/>), renowned columnist, “The Hindus should not enter the temple mentally comparing the temple with churches which are mass assembly and prayer halls. There are subtle forces which operate through the deities installed in the temple, through the *mantras* regularly chanted and the appropriate rituals daily conducted there. So temples are a different phenomenon altogether. This psychological shift is needed for the Hindus not to suffer a complex when they compare the temples with churches which are designed and aimed for altogether different objects. This may also help to differentiate the practices of Christianity and Sanatana Dharma. But in the U.S.A. the temples also serve more intense social purposes and therefore there is bound to be some confusion about the concept of temples as they are in India and those in the US.”

### **Some directional points which the temples should seriously consider:**

In this context, I would also like to quote the following observation of Sri A. Radhakrishnan, writer and intellectual, who gives some directional points which the temples should seriously consider: “There is an urgent need for a clear projection and true assimilation of the Hindu ideals. Barring a few who have taken to the spiritual path with all seriousness, the rest are either ignorant of the fundamentals of our Dharma or are deplorably lackadaisical in their approach. The

rather mechanically observed rituals and ceremonies on several occasions without any clue as to their true purport and significance do not help either. No wonder, the ill-informed followers unwittingly fall a prey to the machinations of self-proclaimed agnostics and decry all Hindu religious practices. Such people really don't know what they are running down and ridiculing, much less what they stand to gain by earnestly observing those rituals and ceremonies. Any attempt to remedy this situation should strike at the roots.

“Temples should impart sound knowledge about these rituals and ceremonies and their rationale, and clearly explain the meaning of various *mantras* chanted on the occasion, their significance, etc. Language should not be a barrier since Sanskrit usages can be properly and accurately rendered into English or any other language familiar to the seeker. One should come out from the cloister and educate the seekers properly. And in doing so, it is essential to link the performance and the objectives of the hoary rituals and practices to the theories and principles of modern science so as to render them logical and intelligible to the modern man. The seemingly wide gap between old-world postulates and recent directives should be narrowed down or eliminated so as to prevent doubters raising irrelevant queries and issues. The knowledge imparted should be perfect and unambiguous. No doubt, a clear presentation of the Dharma will appeal to the Hindus as well as non-Hindus, all alike, because basically Hinduism contemplates an ideal, all-inclusive way of life for mankind and not a set of unverifiable doctrines and dogmas, and unalterable religious edicts for a section of them. With a view to drive home this aspect of our Dharma it would be advisable to hold effective interactive sessions with the followers of other faiths as well. But before attempting such a step the Hindus themselves must be adequately equipped. Hence it is essential that they should be well-informed and adequately trained. Temples of yore used to render yeomen service in this regard. There is no reason why those of the present day also can't achieve similar results. Instruction calls for capable instructors and the temples cannot afford to ignore this aspect.”

**Convincing the modern mind of the scientific temper underlying the spiritual concepts and worship practices:**

For such an effective instruction, the temples should first promote a better understanding through convincing information about the significance and relevance of temple worship in human life.

The *murti* of a Deity in a temple is a dynamic source of spiritual power. There is an efficacious science of *mantras* and rituals for the installation of power in the *murti* of a Deity by invoking the spiritual power from the infinite source, *Brahman*. A Deity with certain special powers will have a suitable symbolic form that represents these divine aspects. The relevant *mantras* and rituals are used for invoking the special spiritual powers represented by a particular form. Invoking and installing spiritual power in a *murti* is a very engaging and illuminating subject for study.

In this context, it is relevant to quote the following observation of Srikant, the author of the well-known book *Power in Temples -- A Modern Perspective*: "According to the highly explorative science of Hindu Dharma, *Brahman*, the Supreme Reality and the source of all phenomenal manifestations, is at once personal and impersonal. In our deepest dimension, we are that timeless source as revealed by the Upanishads: '*tat tvam asi*' – 'That Thou Art'. By worshipping the Reality in its personalized aspect, the worshipper gradually moves closer to the Reality. This liberates one from the limitations of one's imperfect personality and one comes in contact with the all-powerful Divinity. This is an expansion which liberates us from the worries and pains of our limited existence, reinforces us physically, mentally and spiritually and brings to life the Divine Bliss (*ananda*) that transcends the experiences of our ordinary senses. We can even achieve supreme emancipation, as basically we are that timeless Supreme Divine.

"Hindu philosophy asserts that everything in the universe is the manifestation of the One Supreme Source. Today, modern science also asserts that all the phenomena in Nature are the manifestations of a universal capacity, which is referred to as energy; but science is yet to get a deeper understanding of the fundamental nature of this mysterious basic factor called energy, which manifests as the innumerable phenomena. According to Vedanta, *Brahman* is at once Intelligence and Energy. We tend to consider a block of stone or metal as inert and lifeless. But today's science knows that there are tremendously moving energy fields within them that are in a sort of web-like relationship with the whole universe. Hindu philosophy compliments this view of science by highlighting the fact that the stone and everything else are the

manifestations of *Paraa-Shakti*, the transcendental supreme Energy of Brahman, which is at once Energy and Intelligence.”

Energy vibrations and forms are two important aspects of the phenomenal universe. The world of forms is the gross expression of energy. Both these aspects are used in invoking the spiritual power and for communion with the Divine. The energy vibrations are employed in the form of suitable *mantras* and the form aspect as the Deities. Thus, there is a well-coordinated science in the background of temple worship and it is the bounden duty of temples to make the modern world sufficiently aware of this fact. This is very necessary to counter effectively the fallacious and malicious ideas spread by vested interests against this highly rational form of Hindu spiritual practice for communion with *Ishwara* and spiritual expansion.

Certainly, those who visit temples and offer their devout worship will experience its sublime benefits by way of reduction in tensions, reinforcement of the inner faculties, and the salutary effects in the material and spiritual dimensions of life. Along with this, if they get themselves familiar with the rationale and the principles involved in the invocation of the Divine in temples, it will go a long way in deepening their faith and enhancing their quest through matured understanding and mellowed wisdom.

Only when man comes in communion with his inner Self, the Divinity within, he can find freedom from such maladies that affect his body-mind-sense complex. Hindu philosophy offers the know-how to achieve this communion and freedom. The temples are founded on a practical science that helps establish this reinforcing contact with the Divine. With a deeper understanding of this fact, the youth in the U.S.A. can make the best use of the temples for their cultural and spiritual evolution and all-round progress, thereby benefiting them and enriching others who come in contact with them.

The modern man endowed though with a scientific bent of mind, intellectual upbringing and a technological background, not infrequently tends to be influenced by misguiding views and is often pestered with needless doubts and skepticism. Vested quarters like the materialists and dogmatic religionists, are hell bent on propagating distorted versions of the great Hindu Dharma. It is possible to counter such campaigns if we take appropriate and effective intellectual measures. There is no dearth

of logical wisdom and intellectual ideas in the Hindu culture to convince the modern mind of the scientific temper underlying the spiritual concepts and worship practices.

**Temples have to play a significant role in the growth of the Hindu community in terms of its capacity to uphold the Hindu Dharma:**

The temples in the U.S.A. are duty-bound to promote a better understanding of the Hindu Dharma, especially among the younger generation, who must become aware of the rationale of their rich cultural heritage with a modern perspective. In this context, a network of all the temples in the U.S.A. can make a coordinated effort to render the much-needed service. Let us all co-operate whole-heartedly to take an effective step in this direction, which is the crying need of the hour. As Swami Dayanandaji rightly reminds us, “These are the days we need networking. We have to grow together. It is not enough we survive — we have to plan for our growth. The Mandirs have to play a significant role in the growth of the Hindu community in terms of its capacity to uphold the Hindu Dharma.”

Much of this super-scientific wisdom of the Hindu heritage is couched in symbolic and esoteric representations and anecdotes, the most intelligent means adopted by the ancient explorers of Truth, so that the knowledge can survive and percolate through generations and can be rediscovered in any age by way of proper study, guided research and introspection. The temples, particularly in the U.S.A. have a great part to play in inspiring and motivating the younger generation, particularly the young and budding scholars, to dive deep into these treasures of our hoary wisdom, which, in fact, is the precious heritage of the whole mankind.

After Swami Paramananda (<http://tinyurl.com/3s64zd>) established the Vedanta Center in Boston in 1910, the first Hindu temple in the U.S.A., several Hindu temples were gradually established and now there are more than 700 temples in N. America (<http://tinyurl.com/4jrfrc>). Of these, U. S. A. has over 400 temples, the remaining being in Canada. New York has the largest number of temples – 85. California comes second with 55 temples. More than 70 of Hindu temples are visited by 3000-5000 families each week. The growth of Hindu Dharma in America critically depends on the extent to which the Hindu children remain anchored in their timeless traditions. Ensuring this will require collective thought and action. The Hindu

Mandir Executives' Conference (<http://tinyurl.com/4zpccy>) is an avenue where this important question is deliberated upon, and the strategies developed will help in achieving this cherished goal, in a collective setting. Hindus have to work together so that their children can enjoy the same fruits of Dharma which have nourished them so far.

The following views of Sri Bansi Pandit ([www.hindumind.org/index.html](http://www.hindumind.org/index.html)), well-known author on Hindu Dharma, residing at Glen Ellyn, IL, provides a line of thought the salient features of which may be taken into consideration: "Educated Hindus need a demythologized and less ritualistic Hindu Dharma to blend modernity with the vision of the Vedas, Upanishads and other Hindu scriptures. In addition to normal activities, temples need to raise funds to support various institutions such as universities, yoga and meditation centers, senior citizen centers, and hospitals. Such institutions would be the symbol and model of the modern Hindu Dharma. Additionally, temples need to get actively involved in establishing harmonious and respectful relations with American public in their local communities. This could be done by occasionally inviting them to our temple festivals, helping the local charities and working actively with the Council of the World Parliament of Religions to improve inter-community relations".

Referring to a classic example of a monumental failure of Hindus in Britain to provide for their collective needs, a recent case study highlighting the "*Inadequate support structures within the Hindu community*", reported in the 'Hindu Voice UK', points out that though Hindus can worship at shrines in the home, a temple also provides a focal point for the community, and an opportunity to translate their Dharma into collective practice. One of the important functions of a temple, as pointed out by the case study, should be to have a support system to help vulnerable sections of our community in their times of need. Service of people and helping each other in times of hardship is an important aspect of Hindu Dharma, forming one of the 'five duties' enjoined on Hindus which they should perform as a matter of compassion. If they do not incorporate such functions, it will only serve to disintegrate and erode the Hindu community (<http://tinyurl.com/6zrrj7>).

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## COMMENT

From: [swamidevananda@gmail.com](mailto:swamidevananda@gmail.com)

Date: May 13, 2008

This is a very fine article and I appreciate very much the points you are making. ....You have inspired me. I very much appreciate what you have to say and I believe such statements are very much the need of the hour when Hindu identity is in such crisis....They are important in that Hindu identity is under threat everywhere and especially in India. Hindu India did not gain independence 60 years ago, though political India did.

A technical point to keep in mind: mosques are unconsecrated assembly halls (this is an important point vis-à-vis Ayodhya) as are most Protestant churches. However, Catholic churches are consecrated buildings in which Jesus is manifest in the host kept on the altar. There is a similarity here between Catholic churches and temples here. My understanding of a temple is that it is a sacred place created and maintained by ritual and mantra, in which *Ishwara* can manifest and is therefore more directly accessible to the devotee than in nature and society. Therefore, the images are not just symbolic, they are real divine manifestations.

We go to the temple to be seen by the Lord as well as to see the Lord. I am a great advocate of *murti puja* both in the house and temple, and I believe Sri Ramakrishna's greatest contribution to Hindu society and mankind was the simple fact that he worshiped the Divine Mother in a stone image. His example is more important than his philosophy. If one views religion as a psycho-social institution (rather than only a spiritual institution), which is directly related to the identity of a person or community, then image and temple worship are of primary importance in creating and maintaining this identity. The times also require that we create a very strong Hindu identity rather than just a caste and sect identity (which have their place too in society).

Myself and others have tried to undermine the usage of the term "idol" over the years. We have failed because Hindu thinkers themselves unthinkingly use the term everywhere and especially in the press. But there is another approach: to raise the status of the word by using it and giving it superior meaning and context. I tried to do this with the word "Pagan" in the St. Thomas book (<http://hamsa.org/01.htm>), by simply capitalizing it and using it everywhere it was relevant.

Have you seen Dr. Frank Morales new book "*Radical Universalism*" (<http://tinyurl.com/e2bxy>) published by 'Voice of India' (<http://tinyurl.com/3gxahq>). He is an important Hindu thinker and understands our problems in the modern christianised world very well.

-- Devananda (<http://hamsa.org>)

## AUTHOR

Swami Jyotirmayananda Puri hails from South Kanara, Karnataka, India; had his school and college studies at the Mangalore Ramakrishna Mission Students Home; got the *mantra diksha* in 1966 while serving in a firm in Madras, from Swami Vireswarananda, the Tenth President of the Ramakrishna Order; joined the Vivekananda Kendra, Kanyakumari, in 1973; and after *seva*, took to monastic life independently in 1976.

His magnum opus chronicles the important events in the life and times of Swami Vivekananda, and highlights his mission and the message to the world. The first edition of this book (986 pages) was published in 1986, and its fifth edition, entitled '*Vivekananda -- His Gospel of Man-making*' was released at New York in the context of the UN Millennium World Peace Summit 2000. It is available as an e-book on CD-ROM, with an audio-visual presentation titled 'Swami Vivekananda -- The Great Hindu Monk of India and His Lasting Spiritual Legacy to Humanity'.

Swami Jyotirmayananda has been visiting the U.S.A., since 1993, and has attended the 'Parliament of Religions', Chicago (1993); 'Global Vision 2000', Washington (1993); 'UN Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders', New York (2000); 'Vedanta in the Third Millennium' Conference, Vivekananda Vedanta Society, Chicago (2001); the 'Vishwa Dharma Prasaar Yaatra' (2001), Chicago; & the Fourth Biennial Conference of the World Association of Vedic Studies (WAVES), University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, MA, (2002), where he presented a paper on 'India's Spirituality and its World-wide Impact'. In early July 2004, he participated in the 'Konkani Sammelan' at Los Angeles, and also in the Fifth WAVES Conference, University of Maryland, Shady Grove Campus, Maryland, where he presented a paper on 'India's Intellectual Traditions in Contemporary Global Context'.

He was one of the Program Coordinators of the Dharma Summit (<http://tinyurl.com/4zehff>) convened by Swami Dayananda Saraswati and held at the Rutgers University, New Jersey (Aug. 13-15, 2005); and a Coordination Committee Member, Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha Second Convention, Mumbai (October 16, 17 & 18). He participated in the Sixth WAVES Conference on 'Vedic Ideas for Global Harmony & Peace in Modern Context', held from July 8-10, 2006, at the main campus of the University of Houston in Houston, Texas, where he chaired two sessions, and presented two papers, which are online at [www.vivekanandagospel.org](http://www.vivekanandagospel.org) -- the web page mainly dealing with his publication and other activities, while the blogspot (<http://vivekajyoti.blogspot.com>) is a resource on various issues concerning the Hindu society. He can be reached at: [swamijyoti@vivekanandagospel.org](mailto:swamijyoti@vivekanandagospel.org)