

SACRED SPACES AND OBJECTS:

THE VISUAL, MATERIAL, AND TANGIBLE

George Pati



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WE AT THE BRAUER MUSEUM are grateful for the opportunity to present this exhibition curated by George Pati, Ph.D., Surjit S. Patheja Chair in World Religions and Ethics and Valparaiso University associate professor of theology and international studies. Through this exhibition, Professor Pati shares the fruits of his research conducted during his recent sabbatical and in addition provides valuable insights into sacred objects, sites, and practices in India. Professor Pati's photographs document specific places but also reflect a creative eye at work; as an artist, his documents are also celebrations of the particular spaces that inspire him and capture his imagination. Accompanying the images in the exhibition are beautiful textiles and objects of metalware that transform the gallery into its own sacred space, with respectful and reverent viewing becoming its own ritual that could lead to a fuller understanding of the concepts Pati brings to our attention.

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Gregg Hertzlieb, Director/Curator
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SACRED SPACES AND OBJECTS: THE VISUAL, MATERIAL, AND TANGIBLE

George Pati

George Pati, Ph.D., Valparaiso University

यस्य देवे परा भक्तिः यथा देवे तथा गुरौ ।
तस्यैते कथिता ह्यर्थः प्रकाशन्ते महात्मनः ॥

Śvetāśvataro Upaniṣad 6:23

Only in a man who has utmost devotion for God, and who shows the same devotion for teacher as for God, These teachings by the noble one will be illuminating.

Trans. George Pati

THE SACRED SPACES OF INDIA provide a place for divine-human interaction. In the Hindu traditions, such spaces include temples and other settings for rituals and performances, and transformative spaces such as pilgrimage sites, *tīrthasthāna*, a threshold, a ford for crossing over.

“Crossing over” is an apt description of how the objects and rituals of these spaces connect the mundane to the divine, the inner to the outer. As Kapila Vatsyayan, an authority on Indian aesthetics, explicitly argues with regard to space, *hrdyākāśa*, the inner space of the heart, and *bhūtākāśa*, outer physical space, join in communion (Vatsyayan 1991: 318). We can also understand this as the place of connection between the inner self (*ātman*) and the outer, the greater self (*paramātman*). In Hindu temples the main shrine (*vimāna*) represents the form of God, the macrocosm, and the human in the temple precinct, the microcosm. When a devotee worships at the temple, union between the devotee and deity takes place. This union connects the inner and outer spaces of *ātman* and *paramātman*, respectively, which is extremely important in Hinduism and becomes useful in looking at Buddhist and Sikh spaces.

“Sacred Spaces and Objects” captures these inner-outer connections and the sacredness of such spaces in photographs taken by me during my fieldwork in Tañjāvūr and Kāñcipuram in South India in February 2014 and Varanasi and Bodhgayā in North India in January 2014. I focus on four places and three traditions: Hindu temples in Tañjāvūr and Kāñcipuram in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where the devotional traditions of Hinduism emerged between the fourth to ninth centuries before migrating and flourishing in other parts of India; a Buddhist temple in Bodhgayā, in the northern state of Bihar, where Buddha received his enlightenment; and Sikh Gurudvāra in Crown Point, Ind., reinforcing the significance of such spaces in our own community. In addition to architecture, the exhibit discusses objects used for *pūjā*, the act of worship in Hinduism. It is important to bear in mind that all concepts cannot be visually represented in

photographs as in most of the temples it is prohibited to take images of the main deity in the sanctum. Nonetheless, may it be photographs or objects, one can understand how the visual, the material, and the tangible plays a significant role in embodying *bhakti* or devotion, representing bodily engagements with the sacred spaces and objects. These photographs and objects provide viewers with a glimpse of the lived world of those functioning in these spaces and using these objects, and they connect the viewer with the photographs and the objects. As Arjun Appadurai argues commodities “have social lives” and to comprehend these social lives, we must “follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories” (Appadurai 1986, 3, 5). And as David Morgan asserts that living as they were when the photograph was taken, they become part of the “somatic present” that the bodily presence of the viewer extends to the photo on the wall (Morgan 2012, 301).

Let us then direct our attention to the devotional traditions of Hinduism, *bhakti*, which concretizes in temple spaces. Hinduism, an umbrella term coined by British Colonialists in the 19th century, referred to South Asian traditions, including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, which were not part of the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Only much later did people identify themselves as

Hindus. Hinduism is often referred to as polytheistic, but the reality is that there are monotheistic tendencies present. Here, Max Müller’s term, kathenotheism, proves helpful, the practice of worshipping one god at a time while not rejecting others. In Hinduism, there are many gods and names, but they have the same essence — one to many and many to one. Hindus strive to achieve *mokṣa*, liberation from the *karma samsāra*, the cycle of rebirth; this concept can be loosely associated to the concept of salvation in Christianity. Various paths can lead to *mokṣa*, including *karma mārga* or path of action, *jñāna mārga* or path of knowledge, and *bhakti mārga* or path of devotion. The *ātman*, the immortal self, reincarnates many times before liberation remains foundational. The *puruṣārtha*, four goals, including *dharma* (duty or law or religion), *artha* (possession), *kāma* (desire or love), and *mokṣa*, also play a significant role in the life of a Hindu. *Mokṣa* is the culmination of the other three goals.

Though rituals were performed from the Vedic period on, temples became prominent in the religious landscape with the emergence of *bhakti* tradition during the medieval period. The *bhakti mārga*, or *bhakti yoga*, emphasizes binding to the path of devotion by surrendering at God’s feet, *śaranāgati*, and receiving God’s grace, which is emphasized wonderfully in the *bhakti* literature from the Tamil-speaking region in the South, especially the texts of *Tevāram* and *Nālāyīradiyā*

Fig. 1 | Brhadisvara Temple, Keralantaka Gopuram



Fig. 2 / Brhadisvara Temple, Courtyard



Prabandham, and elsewhere in India. These devotional traditions emphasize monotheistic tendencies toward one of the three main Hindu deities — Śiva, Viṣṇu, and Devī — each of which has many forms and names. These deities are represented in their anthropomorphic form except for Śiva, who is popularly represented in the aniconic form of male and female generative organs, symbolizing the generative power in Śiva. In the anthropomorphic form, Śiva is represented with hairlock, serpent, and crescent moon, and his consort is the goddess Pārvatī (divine feminine energy). Viṣṇu can be recognized by his four arms holding discus, conch, lotus, and club, and his consort is the goddess Śrī Lakṣmi. Viṣṇu has ten *avatārs* or incarnations and has different forms, including Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narasimhan (man-lion), Vāmana (Dwarf), Paraśurāma (Rama with Axe), Rāma (hero of the epic *Rāmāyaṇam*), Kṛṣṇa (of *Bhagavad Gīta*), Balarāma, and Kalki (the one yet to come). Devī is the goddess also known as Śakti, meaning divine power/energy. She is the independent one, who does not have a male consort as the previous two goddesses. Her popular forms Durga and Kālī are represented killing the demon, whom the male deities were unable to kill. Though references to these deities can be understood in one of the earliest and authoritative texts in Hinduism, *Rg Veda* ca. 1500-500 BCE, devotional traditions popularized them through narrative traditions and rituals. For devotees of each deity, the respective deity remains supreme as they conceive the transcendence and immanence of the deity. Such devotional attitude abounds in a devotee as one

embarks on a pilgrimage trip to these spaces of worship in India and beyond. It is to these spaces that embody devotion and objects employed for expressing devotion that we turn our attention.

Brhadisvara Temple at Tañjāvūr, Tamil Nadu, constructed between 995 and 1010 CE, and regarded as the greatest masterpiece of the Chola architecture, remains as a unique embodiment of love with Śiva.

As one arrives at the Keralantaka Gopuram (Fig.1) or gateway, that leads to the main shrine where Śiva resides, one observes the pyramidal shape of the *gopuram* denoting a tongue of fire, and on either side of the entrance, images of the river goddesses, Ganga and Yamuna, representing water. This implies that when devotees cross the gateway they are symbolically cleansed by fire and water — the two most sacred elements for Hindus (Chakravarthy 2010). For Śaivites, devotees of Śiva, Śiva is creator, sustainer, and destroyer.

The rectangular temple precinct (Fig. 2) has many sub-shrines dedicated to other deities of the Hindu pantheon namely, Amman, Gaṇapati, Karuvūr Devar, Subramanya, and Caṇḍikeśvarā, which are hierarchically organized, but the main deity Śiva dwells in the main shrine (Fig. 2) and is worshipped through his aniconic image of *liṅgam* (phallus)

Fig. 3 / Brhadisvara Temple, Liṅgam and Yoni



and *yoni* (womb), symbolizing the generative power of Śiva (Fig. 3). Below is a smaller image present in the temple courtyard (*prakārās*) as the main image in the main shrine cannot be photographed. This aniconic representation of Śiva emphasizes that Śiva has both the masculine and feminine generative power as he is also referred to as Ardhanārīśvara, half-female Lord.

The temple stands as an architectural marvel, built with migmatitic granite ranging in shade from beige to dark grey. The sanctuary tower of the main shrine (Fig. 4) follows a square plan and was constructed in alignment with the longitudinal axis of the design, which was prevalent in Tamil country since the time of the Pallavas, (sixth to ninth CE) and later adopted by the Chola dynasty, (fourth BCE to 13th CE). The fifteen-story sanctuary tower rises to a height of 61

Fig. 4 | Brhadīśvara Temple, Main Sanctuary Tower



meters and rests on a high square plinth.

The sanctuary tower includes an interior wall running

concentrically around the sanctum, a corridor and an exterior wall. The square sanctum of the Brhadīśvara temple measures 7.90 meters, and the stone roof is supported by transversal and diagonal beams. The sanctum houses the large monolithic *liṅgam* as the one shown in Fig. 3, but in this case, much bigger in size. The service floor, measuring 2.60 meters from the ground and around the sanctum, allowed one to reach the summit of the *liṅgam* during *abhiṣekam*, or libation. Libation is a purificatory process performed by offering various liquids, including water, milk, honey, yogurt, turmeric paste, rose water, and sandalwood paste, before the image is established with life breath, *prāṇapratिषṭā*, and then adorned and worshipped. An inscription in the temple records it as Adavallan – one who dances well, and Dakṣinameru Vitānkar, the name of the deity associated with Śiva temple at Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu. The Cholas worshipped the deity at Chidambaram, and therefore they named the deity at Brhadīśvara with the same name.

A devotee enters the temple and passes through the corridor that leads to the sanctum, where Śiva resides. Once the devotee takes a gaze and pays respect to the deity, he or she circumambulates the sanctum. Gaze of the deity remains a quintessential act of worship in Hinduism, as it reinforces an exchange between the divine and human. This exchange signifies union between the deity and devotee – the goal of devotional traditions.

While one exits the sanctum through the left side exit, below the stairs one encounters a stone carved plate of

Fig. 5 | Brhadīśvara Temple, plate with Buddha's image



Buddha meditating under a tree (Fig. 5). This plate reflects the presence of Buddhism in the South before the Hindu devotional traditions became popular. Prior to this, Buddhism and Jainism were widely practiced in the South. This plate attests to this historical fact. The entire façade of the temple functions as a narrative scroll, depicting mythological stories, demarking the space as sacred, and emphasizing the temple space to be the abode of the divine.

Our next stop, Kāñcipuram, the city that derives its name from a combination of two terms, “Ka” meaning Brahma and “*añjitham*” meaning worship. It is believed that Brahma, the Ultimate Reality, worshipped Lord Varadarāja and Goddess Śrī Kāmākṣi in Kāñci; hence, its name Kāñcipuram. It is one of the seven sacred cities in India, including Ayodhyā, Mathurā, Māyā, Kāśi, Kāñci, Avantī, and Dvārakā; death in any one of the seven cities would give *mokṣa* to an individual. This aspect makes the entire city a threshold or ford connecting the sacred and the mundane. Kāñcipuram is famous for its magnificent temples devoted to Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Devī, gorgeous silk sāris (six meters/nine meters of cloth worn by women in India) woven with dexterity to adorn the deities and for ritual purposes, and its association with Saint philosophers Ādi Śaṅkara (eighth CE) and Śrī Rāmānuja (10th CE). Devotion is all-pervasive in the entire city of Kāñcipuram. Originally the town had 1000 temples of which only 200 are left.

The most famous sacred space devoted to Viṣṇu in Kāñcipuram is the Varadarāja Perumāl temple (Fig. 6), constructed towards the end of the Chola period in the 13th century. The name Viṣṇu is derived from the Sanskrit root verb, *viś*, meaning to pervade; hence, he is also referred to as the All-Pervading One. Viṣṇu enters the universe in different incarnations (as mentioned earlier in the essay) to intervene in chaos and to bring order. The V-shaped mark on the forehead of devotees affirms his sovereignty or as it is present on the main shrine tower with blue background (Fig. 6). The original god of the place was the Narasiṁha (lion-man) form of Viṣṇu, which the Ālvārs, the devotees of Viṣṇu, recorded in their hymns. By the 11th century, the standing form of Viṣṇu became prominent with the above noted local philosopher Śrī Rāmānuja, contributing to its popularity. Apart from the main Narasiṁha temple, there are other shrines devoted to other deities, namely Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma, Rāma, Anantālvār,

and goddess Perumdevī Tāyār or Śrī Devī. All these shrines have *maṇḍapa*, temple halls, with many stone carved columns, where rituals and classical dance performances are performed.

The enclosure wall around the main shrine carries murals of the 108 *divya desas*, sacred abodes. There are three courtyards

Fig. 6 / Varadarāja Perumāl Temple, Kāñcipuram



or *prakārās*, and the second courtyard enclosed with double-story pillared colonnade includes four shrines, especially one for Malayāla Nacciyar, the consort from Kerala, South India, thereby attesting to the brief Chera occupation of Kāñcipuram in the early 14th century.

Varadarāja Perumāl Temple has extensive mural paintings that date back to the Vijayanagara Age around the 16th century. Among the various mural paintings, the painting of Viṣṇu in the reclining position, *anantaśayana*, on the serpent bed of Ādiśeṣa, remains distinct (Fig. 7).

At his head, Viṣṇu’s consort Tāyār or Śrī Devī remains seated in her own shrine, and by his leg stands Viṣṇu’s mount, Garuḍa with *añjalihasta* (salutary hand gesture). Besides

Fig. 7 | Varadarāja Perumāl Temple, Mural Painting of Anantaśayana Viṣṇu



these mural paintings, the temple has stone carved images of birds and animals associated with mythological stories of the Vaiṣṇava tradition. For example, the image of a peacock (Fig. 8). These motifs are reflected in sāris woven in Kāñcipuram connecting the temple, traditions, and textiles. These sāris are used for adorning the deity and during rituals, as well. This temple provides devotees of Viṣṇu a sacred space to express their devotion and affirm that Viṣṇu is supreme.

Fig. 8 | Varadarāja Perumāl Temple, Peacock stone carving



Śrī Ekāmbaranātha Temple with its nine story high (58.5 meters) *gopuram* testifies to love with Siva (Fig. 9). The temple receives its name from the modified form of *eka amra nāthar*, meaning the Lord of the unique mango tree, because of a myth that Śiva sat for penance under a mango tree. The temple was built prior to the seventh century by Narasinhavarman II, king of the Pallava dynasty, and then around the 16th century, extensively renovated by Kṛṣṇadevarāya, the emperor of Vijayanagara (Rao 2008). The temple has five *prakārās*, temple courtyards. One of the unique features of the temple complex is the huge Āyiram Kāl Mandapam, thousand pillar temple hall (albeit only 616 survive today) (Fig. 10).

This temple does not have a separate shrine for Pārvatī, the consort of Śiva. It is believed that the main aniconic image of Śivalinga of this temple was originally worshipped by Pārvatī. Additionally, devotees believe that the Kāmākṣi Amman Temple dedicated to Goddess Pārvatī in Kāñcipuram, popularized by the saint philosopher Ādi Saṅkarācārya, is the consort temple for the Śrī Ekāmbaranātha Temple. As mentioned earlier, Śiva is always referred with his consort Pārvatī, and since in this temple Pārvatī is not present, the temple in the city that is

Fig. 9 | Śrī Ekāmbaranātha Temple, Kāñcipuram



Fig. 10 / Śrī Ekāmbaranātha Temple, Kāñcipuram



dedicated to Pārvatī is considered as the consort temple of Śrī Ekāmbaranātha Temple, where Śiva reigns supreme.

Another temple that needs attention is the Kailāsanātha Temple in Kāñcipuram (Fig. 11), constructed during the seventh to eighth centuries during the Pallava period, dedicated to Śiva, who is also known as the Lord of the cosmic mountain, Kailāś; hence its name.

This temple built with stones in the ground-up pattern as against the rock cut quarrying method represents the Gāndhāra style of architecture. The inside wall of the

Fig. 11 / Kailāsanātha Temple, Kāñcipuram



courtyard surrounding the sanctum and the *mandapa*, temple hall, has 53 small shrines (most of them dilapidated through age) as cited below housing elegant forms of Śiva taken from the Śaiva literature. It has seven sub-shrines with images of Lord Śiva at the corners as shown in the pictures (Figs. 13 & 14). One of the forms of Śiva is the Śiva Natarājā, the Lord

Fig. 12 / Kailāsanātha Temple, Inside Courtyard Wall



of dance (Fig. 13), representing Śiva as the cosmic dancer embodying and manifesting eternal energy. It is believed that Śiva dances the cosmic dance that sustains the universe through vibration. The Lingodbhavamūrti of Śiva (Fig. 14) on the south façade shows Śiva holding the axe in one hand and in the other the trident. Śiva embodies the ascetic and the erotic and this is represented through the hairlock (symbol of asceticism) and snake (symbol of eroticism/fertility).

The main shrine has an eight-foot high black granite Śivalingam, and on the rear wall is somaskanda, Śiva, Uma, and Skanda, found in all Pallava temples. The main vimāna, shrine tower, stands towards the western end of the courtyard.

Fig. 13 / Kailāsanātha Temple, Śiva Natarājā



Fig. 14 | Kailāsanātha Temple, Liṅgodbhavamūrti of Śiva



Fig. 16 | Buddhist Temple, Bodhgayā



From Kāñcīpuram in the south, we direct our attention to the northern state of Bihar, where stands the Buddhist Temple at Bodhgayā, marking an auspicious or *śubha* place for Buddhists. In Indian culture, particularly Hinduism, the distinction between auspiciousness or *śubha* and inauspiciousness or *aśubha* is extremely important. On the one hand, auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, in the case of events or timings, has to do with the event or time being conducive for the well being of the individual or society; on the other hand, it is concerned with power, particularly political power.

Fig. 15 | Bodhi Tree, Bodhgayā



Closely associated to this concept is the idea of purity and pollution associated with hierarchy, which governs the Caste system in India. Though auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are extremely important in Hinduism, they are reflected in Buddhism that emerged around the seventh to fifth century BCE in India by Buddha, who received enlightenment in

Bodhgayā under the Banyan Tree (*Ficus religiosa*), which was later named as the Bodhi Tree (Fig. 15). Practitioners of Buddha's teachings established a temple at Bodhgayā and placed his image for worship (Figs. 16). This is a pilgrimage place for Buddhists to come and meditate with the hope of receiving enlightenment as Buddha. Such devotion to the Bodhi tree in this space of the temple was "sanctioned during Buddha's time as the tree generated symbolism" and in "Bodhgayā the tree remains tangible, material, literally rooted in the realm of form" (Nugteren 2015: 211).

Devotional traditions emphasize the employment of all our senses. Material objects of worship are ubiquitous in the religious landscape and devotees perceive these objects as sacred and relate with reverence. In Hinduism, *pūjā* or worship involves seeing, touching, listening, singing, reciting, tasting, smelling, contemplating, walking, giving, and receiving. This is evident in other South Asian traditions, as well. In these temple spaces, various objects are used for ritual purposes, may it be aniconic or iconic images of the deities, or objects used in rituals such as lamps or vessels. Though all the spaces in themselves reinforce the presence of the divine and serve as a nexus for divine human interaction, the objects

are critical to worship and enrich the material and spiritual experience.

Lamps are used in temples and houses as a way of marking sacredness during morning or evening time or in the performance of a ritual. The *Nilavilakk*, floor lamp, considered

Fig. 17 / *Nilavilakk*, floor lamp



as one of the most revered objects for Hindu *pūjā* or worship, is derived of two words in the Malayālam language of South India, “*nilam*” meaning earth and “*vilakk*” meaning lamp (Fig. 17). *Nilavilakk* is made of brass and its shape allows for holding the wick in different directions. The *Nilavilakk* signifies “fire,” a sacred symbol of purity in Hinduism. Therefore, lighting of this lamp signifies sacredness of the

household and is believed to ward off evil forces. Additionally, any auspicious day will start with the lighting of this lamp. *Thūkvilakk*, or brass hanging lamps, are found in temple corridors (Fig. 18). The *Kotivilakk*, hand lamp, is used during worship to light lamps, and the *Dhūpakkāl*, incense stand (Fig. 19), is used to smoke the sanctum with incense. Small

Kiṇti, vessels with spouts, keep

sanctified water for ritual purposes (Fig. 20). These objects, and the rituals they support, reinforce the idea of purity and pollution that is strictly maintained in Hindu traditions.

Besides these objects, sacred texts play a significant role in the life of a Hindu. One of the sacred texts popularly read at temples or households is the *Rāmāyaṇam*. *Rāmāyaṇam*, a Sanskrit epic, written around the fourth century BCE by Vālmiki, consists of more than 50,000 verses arranged in seven volumes. The story depicts Rāma, an incarnation of Viṣṇu, as the ideal hero king, who fulfills his *dharma*, the duty of taking care of his kingdom by overcoming evil. Though the text plays an integral role in Hinduism, Sikhism, a tradition which emerged around the 15th century in India, considers

the sacred text, *Guru Granth Sahib*, as a living Guru or teacher. In 1708, *Guru Gobind Singh*, the last human guru, on his deathbed declared the scripture to be the eternal *guru*.

The *Guru Granth Sahib* is always handled with respect and placed on a raised platform. The text contains writings of Sikh Gurus, Hindu devotional saints, and Muslim bards, emphasizing devotion towards God and establishing union between the divine and human.

Fig. 19 / *Dhūpakkāl*, incense stand

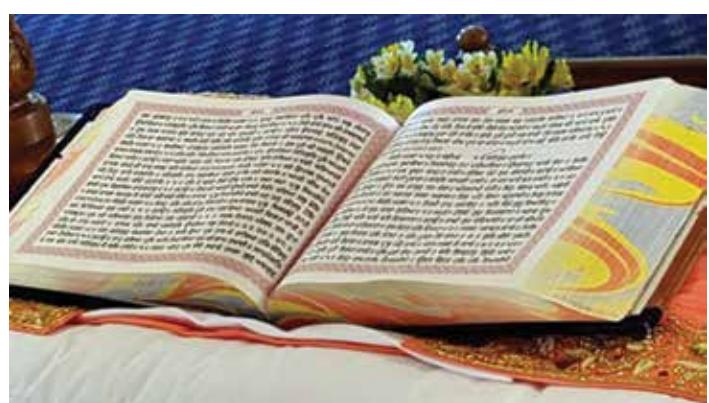


Fig. 20 / *Kiṇti*, vessel with spout



This exhibition highlights the expressive character of tangible sacred spaces and objects, illustrating how devotion is embodied in these traditions. This expressive, rich material culture is essential to the practice and heritage of South Asian religions. More importantly, it gives us a glimpse into the lived experiences of those practicing these traditions and encourages us to explore the world of meanings of the “other” represented by these spaces and objects of South Asian religious traditions and to engage with the “other” with respect.

Fig. 21 / The *Guru Granth Sahib*, Photo by Dr. Surjit Patheja, 2015



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RESPONSE TO GEORGE PATI'S PHOTOGRAPHS

by Gretchen Buggeln, Ph.D., Valparaiso University

For several years, my co-teachers and I took the students in our sophomore “Word and Image” honors course to the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago in Lemont, Ill. In this course, we first briefly studied the architecture, art, and rituals of the Christian tradition as a way of thinking about the relationship between belief, religious authority, and embodied tradition. Then we read Diana Eck’s short and accessible book *Darśan*, an introduction to the important practice of devotional *looking* in Hinduism: darshan, the exchange of the gaze between the Hindu devotee and the deities. Local physician Dr. Subba Nagubadi further prepared the students with a helpful introductory lecture about his Hindu faith. The field trip provided the students with a remarkable contrast in religious practices and material traditions, one that invited them to think differently about the relationships between sacred spaces, objects, and devotional practices in their own religious communities.

Students familiar with most branches of Christianity are used to experiencing worship as an ordered, communal ritual. One main worship space, typically the site of primary communal worship, contains several critical focal points, including altar, pulpit, font, and lectern. As the focus of worship activity, most often led by clergy, moves around the space, the worshippers shift their attention accordingly. For most Christians, worship involves a lot of sitting and listening, singing together, and perhaps moving towards the altar or font in an orderly manner. This is not to say that Christian worship is necessarily dull, but it is a highly choreographed group event, and the ear and eye are typically much more involved than other senses. The degree of ornamentation in Christian worship space varies from the plainest, humblest Protestant meetinghouses to highly ornate spaces of Roman Catholics or Eastern Orthodox. Regardless of the degree of ornament, however, decoration and the architecture itself will typically show a large degree of stylistic consistency and coherence.

As is common for many American Hindu temples that serve a diverse South Asian community, the Lemont temple incorporates a range of Hindu regional traditions in order to accommodate a wide variety of worshippers. The site includes two main temples devoted to different deities (the Rama Temple and the Ganesha-Shiva-Durga Temple) and the buildings reflect the architectural heritage of both North and South India. Even from the outside, the temple looks intriguingly complex and de-centered.

Most of my students, largely of Christian background, had never seen anything like the richness, complexity, physical abundance, and distinct otherness of the Lemont temple. Instead of a space organized for highly structured communal Sunday worship, they encountered a multiplicity of worship activities taking place all at once in diffuse settings. Hindu priests in their traditional white clothing lit fires and incense, chanted in unfamiliar language, rang bells in a repetitive, rhythmic pattern, and bathed, clothed, and fed the deities. Bright colors, vocal and instrumental sounds, and wafting smells of incense and food abounded. It was a feast for the senses. The devotees performed these rituals with a degree of respect that included removing shoes, bowing, and chanting or sitting in quiet contemplation. And perhaps equally surprising for the students, devotees informally blended all of these rituals with casual conversations with family and friends, while children were running about exploring all the while.

For students who come from congregationally ordered traditions focused on word and doctrine, Hinduism is challenging to understand. The apparently simple question “but what does a Hindu believe?” has no easy answer. A concentration not on belief but on *practice*, watching believers interact with each other amid a colorful and complex material culture, proved a better way for students to gain an initial understanding of this tradition.

Here at the Brauer Museum, George Pati's beautiful photographs illuminate the visual and material brilliance of Hinduism and Buddhism for us, opening a window into South Asian culture. No matter our own religious convictions, we can appreciate the extraordinarily complex and delicate craftsmanship and begin to understand the ancient practices and the holy places displayed in his pictures.

South Asians among us in Northwest Indiana are the inheritors of the beauty and history Pati depicts, yet it is good to remember that this is a vital and living, constantly changing, infinitely complex and varied tradition. Pati shows us something analogous to Christianity's great medieval cathedrals, extraordinary places that display the visual and material heights achieved by earlier adherents of a tradition in a formative age. American Hindus today, although rooted in ancient practices and forms such as we see in Pati's photographs, adapt their traditions to new places, such as the multifaceted temple in Lemont, or the Sikh Temple (Gurdwara Sahib) down the road in Crown Point, Ind. As there are many expressions of Christianity, so South Asians engage in a multiplicity of practices all over the contemporary world.

Brhadisvara Temple, Snake



What compels our interest in such holy places as these? Pati's argument that these sacred spaces and objects are sites of connection between the inner and outer person, the world outside and the world within, explains our fascination with what we see in his photographs and our desire to *be there*. Our fragmented modern selves are drawn to experiences that promise to reunite, center, and heal ourselves and our communities. That shared human impulse connects us across traditions, from the Chapel of the Resurrection, to the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, and across oceans of space and time to the remarkable temples of India.

AFTERWORD

by David Morgan, Ph.D., Duke University

Ancient Greek philosophy invented a way of speaking that came to dominate the modern Western view of the human self and the universe, and to do so in a way that still deeply affects how scholars approach the study of religions. When scholars encounter something for the first time, they are not likely to respond by telling stories about it, drawing pictures of it, singing songs about how it makes them feel, or dancing in its presence and inviting it to reply in kind. Instead, scholars are trained to define what they study by measurement and the analysis of its features and function, to identify its essence, to place it within a taxonomy, to classify or specify the phenomenon. This is scientific procedure, and it has much to offer. It turns indeterminate ‘things’ into defined objects of knowledge. It seeks to make the world apprehensible in and as language by continually spreading a membrane or fabric of discourse over the surface of things. But as a discursive activity, it easily results in greater care for taxonomies and the wherewithal of classification and discourse than concern for the peculiarity of the things scholars cloak beneath the fabric of organized knowledge.

But things have a way of pushing back. The term that students of rhetoric and others have developed for this property is *recalcitrance*. It consists of a resistance to the purity, simplicity, consistency, harmony, and predictability that science has prized as the basis for the stability of knowing. Scientific revolutions erupt when the imprecision of paradigm and phenomena become perceptible. Orthodoxies fall and new ways of thinking take their place. Recalcitrance is one very important reason why: when things resist our confidence in defining them, we are thrown back on our resources and must look for new ways to engage them. Things can force us to accommodate them, and the prospects are exciting.

In recent decades, the study of religions has become increasingly aware of the problems of identifying a religion with a philosophical system of ideas, a theology, or a set of dogmas and doctrines. To be sure, some religions over the last few millennia exhibit forms of discourse that bear something of this intellectual quality of foregrounding abstractions, key terms, and definitions in the representation of a group’s identity or distinction from its rivals. Indeed, the most influential and politically powerful

Western religion in the last thousand years, Christianity, has often made a point of insisting on the preeminence of theological discourse as bearing the essence of the faith. And the target of that discourse has been the formulation of true belief, or orthodoxy. Yet scholars in a variety of sub-fields of anthropology and religious studies have been wary of accepting the normativity of this view since they have recognized the damage it does to the productive understanding of religions as embodied, performed, emotional, aesthetically-engaged, practical human activities. This has not meant denying belief a place in the study of religion, but regarding it as something more than discursive. After all, when children are reared in a religious tradition, it is first and foremost an aesthetic education they undergo by learning how to sing, recite, eat, sit, bow, dress, see, listen, feel, and gather together. Everything children ever learn thereafter about ideas and moral tenets takes its place within the embodied matrix of the practices that remain the lived, spatial, and shared coordinates of their religious lives. And for adult converts, the same aesthetic education must take place, in albeit concentrated form. One must learn to look, sound, move, dress, eat, and chant like a Christian or Hindu or Buddhist in order to feel like one.

If we attend carefully to religious peoples and their places and practices, the recalcitrance of things presses us into the domain of what George Pati has helpfully summarized as the visual, material, and tangible registers of religions. The challenge that his photography and careful descriptions of Hindu spaces and objects pose for people of other faiths, such as Christianity, is to think anew about the embodied nature of their own religion. It is easy to take one’s own for granted because doing so allows Christians to let the body sink into unconsciousness and the philosophy of belief, enshrined in theology, to stand forth as superior, immaterial, invisible, intangible—as pure and exalted. Odd that a religion premised on the incarnation of its deity would prefer to do so. Yet if they will allow the body to perform its recalcitrance, Christians may find in Pati’s imagery a prompt to think about their own religious practices and spaces in a new and illuminating way. For scholars, the rediscovery of embodiment will enable a deeper understanding of religions as lived forms of practice and feeling, and offer an enriched access that excessive intellectualization easily restricts.



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Hours for fall and spring semesters when classes are in session:

Monday	Closed
Tuesday	10 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Wednesday	10 a.m. – 8:30 p.m.
Thursday & Friday	10 a.m. – 5 p.m.
Saturday & Sunday	Noon – 5 p.m.