

Spiritual Development through Devaalaya (Hindu Temple)

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Introduction:

The great rishis of Sanatana Dharma or Hinduism gave us the vision and plan for life through the four-fold objective namely Dharma (righteous values and knowledge), Artha (righteously earned wealth), Kama (righteous desires) and Moksha (Bliss through spiritual union with God). In order to achieve these four-fold objectives, one needs to put efforts through righteous approach with pure mind. It is well known that purification of one's mind is based on one's spiritual development. The integration of devotion, knowledge and action is essential for spiritual development. In this process of spiritual development in one's life, a devaalaya (Hindu Temple) has many roles.

Devaalaya and its significance:

Devaalaya means abode (alaya) of God (Deva). As per the Pancharatra Agama, a scripture for science of temples and worship practice, God has five aspects. They are Para (Supreme), Vyuha (Emanations), Vibhava (Incarnation), Antaryamin (Indweller) and Archa (consecrated sculptures or vighras for worship at temples and homes). It is also said that "Deho Devaalayaha Proktaha, Dehi Devo Niranjana", which means that the devaalaya represents the body of a living human being and the indweller is God. It can be seen that there are three sacred spaces for worship where in one can focus and contemplate on God. The *first space* is one's own heart wherein one should meditate on the Lord. Then the *second space* is the pooja room in one's home where in an altar should be set to worship the Lord on a regular basis. Then the *third space* is a Devaalaya where in one participates in the worship with family and the community. All these three spaces are connected spiritually. Among these three sacred spaces of worship, the devaalaya is built and worship practices are carried out there as per the scriptures (Agama Shastras).

In the representation of the devaalaya as a human body, the Gopura at the main entrance represents the feet, the prayer hall represents the heart, the entrance to sanctum sanctorum represents the neck, the sanctum sanctorum itself represents the head and the walkway around the temple represents the hands. The walking from outside world to the inside of a Devaalaya represents that a seeker is getting into meditation to dwell upon God within. The various activities in a

devaalaya such as worship, educational, cultural and service ought to help the seeker-devotee to be able to get rid of the ego and develop a pure meditative mind. Then the seeker devotee with meditative mind can travel within through the path of yoga (and mediation) to realize God within. Thus we see that our rishis gave us the devaalaya to be used as a laboratory for our spiritual development. Devaalaya is a very special place that plays a multi-faceted role in the spiritual development of any seeker.

In addition to the first consecration of the temple according to the Agama scriptures when it opens for religious service. Then, at every twelve years also a special consecration is carried out as per the scriptures. The number twelve is significant in our zodiac system and also as a time cycle as it represents twelve months. The twelve also refers to the twelve names of Lord namely Keshava, Narayana, Madhava, Govinda, Vishnu, Madhusudana, Trivikrama, Vamana, Sridhara, Hrishiksha, Padmanabha and Damodara. Then twelve also represents the number of jyotirlingas in India. Also. In the Jain tradition, Mahamastakabhisheka is done every twelve years. The Kumbhamela in the Hindu tradition is also done every twelve years. Given that a devaalaya is part of a spiritual seeker's life, the various roles it has are briefly described below.

Devaalaya as a sacred place for worship (Poojaalaya)

Devaalaya as a place of worship that provides the seeker, both a practical and an experiential way through devotion to subjectively connect to the God through a medium called Vighraha. The term Vighraha means that which specially captures the mind of a devotee. The postures of the vighrahas are based on the yogic visions of the sages. They are not imaginations. These vighrahas are sculpted, sanctified and worshipped based on the Agama scriptures. So, meditating on them will help the devotee to advance in spiritual path. In a devaalaya, we see that all the five senses namely hearing, touch, sight, taste and smell are utilized through listening to mantras, offering of flowers, seeing the vighraha, drinking the holy water and smell of incense. Thus the absorption of the divine energy through the five senses can be used effectively by a devotee to focus his or her mind on God. The subjective relationship between the devotee and God through the worship by a priest is very important in the spiritual development. Lord Krishna in Bhagavad-Gita (7-16) describes for types of devotees namely the ones in distress, then ones seeking wealth, ones seeking knowledge and wisdom and the ones who are advanced in spiritual knowledge and knower.

The sixteen offerings used in a Pooja (worship of God) are (1) Invoking God into Vighraha, (2) Offering a seat, (3) Washing feet, (4)

Washing hands, (5) Water for sipping, (6) Sacred bath, (7) Sacred cloth, (8) Sacred thread, (9) Sandal paste, (10) flowers, (11) Incense and Waving an oil lamp, (12) Food, (13) Betel leaves and coconut, (14) Waving of a camphor light, (15) Clockwise circumambulation and (16) Prostration. Thus we see that pooja can be seen as analogous to treating one's respected and beloved guest. In addition to going to a devaalaya, every Hindu needs to have at home a special room with altar with vigraha to do pooja. A pooja at home or a devaalaya is a synthesis of devotion, knowledge and action that provides tranquility. In the words of yogi-seer Sriranga Sadguru of Ashtanga Yoga Vijnana Mandiram, Mysore, India, "the worship of Deities with rituals at home or devaalaya should be carried out with child-like loving mind by the devotees as little children play with joy using their toys as medium".

Devaalaya as a place for spiritual education (Vidyaalaya)

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 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. Also, time should be provided to answer questions by devotees both the young and the old. Concepts such as the four hands of the vigraha representing the blessing of four-fold objectives namely dharma, artha, kama 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.

Devaalaya as a place for cultural arts (Kalaalaya)

The music, dance, painting, etc form the vibrant part of Sanatana dharma. It is well known that the seekers through music and dance have realized God. In the time when festivals are celebrated at the devaalaya special cultural programs including educational aspects should be arranged. Various themes corresponding to the festivals such as Shivaratri, Ramanavami, Krishna Janmashtami etc should be presented

as dance-dramas so that the youngsters can understand and appreciate better. Cultural fairs need to be arranged in which classical art forms are to be emphasized.

Devaalaya as a place for service (Sevaalaya)

Volunteers form the core work group of a devaalaya. Any work done in the devaalaya in the areas such as worship, education, culture, crowd management, fund raising, facility maintenance etc can be seen as a service. However specific programs for serving the community such as free health fairs, counseling for students and adults, senior citizen oriented activities, outreach to hospitals and nursing homes, feeding the poor, etc. need to be carried out regularly.

Concluding Remarks

Thus we see that a devaalaya is a place where all facets of Sanatana Dharma namely Jnana (knowledge), Bhakti (devotion) and Karma (service) come together. The management of a devaalaya which is also made up of volunteers is to make sure that all the above four aspects are equally emphasized. One way to ensure equal emphasis is by requiring that all trustees or directors of the board has to be involved in one of the four areas namely worship, education, culture and service. It is important that the management board truly work towards making the volunteers in all areas feel that their services are contributing to the devaalaya. All these areas need to be budgeted properly. It is to be remembered that devaalaya provides an opportunity for all volunteers including trustees and chairpersons to get rid of their ego and make progress in their spiritual development through serving the common cause namely the God.

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