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### The Role Temples Play in the Understanding and Practice of Hinduism

Why do we go to temples? The answers are wide-ranging and subjective. "I find peace there", "my parents go and hence I go", and "we are supposed to go there at least one a week", are some of the answers we get, says Sridhar, National Editor for the supplements of the Times of India.

As I reflected on this question, I thought that my answers were similar and I embarked on a quest to seek knowledge. In our modern world, temples have been relegated to as places, nodes among the myriad places we visit in our lives. We have lost the knowledge on the importance of temples over time, just as much as our loss of knowledge on culture and heritage. Let us turn time back to understand what it meant to have a temple in a city.

Temples, started in the dawn of the Kali Yuga, were the focal point of human lives. They not only provided religious and cultural support to our lives, but they also provided educational and social support. Temples were developed for devotees to feel God's presence, communicate with Him, and meet for religious discourses and bhajans.

Hindu temples according to the Society of Abidance in Truth represent the "entire gamut of the cosmos and human experience pointing the way to Knowledge of the Supreme, which in Advaita Vedanta is understood to be Self-Knowledge".

Every aspect of temples, from their design to the rituals performed there, has a meaning and is closely related to our lives. Consider for a moment that the foremost reason for a temple is worship and satiation of religious thirst. Why build temples so elaborately with such intricate details? The 'prahara' of Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple at Srirangam in Tamil Nadu covers the whole village. Angkor Wat in Cambodia and the Brihadeeswara Temple in Tanjavur, India, both exemplify majestic architecture. These temples, along with many others, have withstood the test of time and have served as a physical and psychological support to society. The grandeur of the temples was a mechanism to preserve cultural heritage and record passed events. Therefore, a display of devotion was not the only reason to visit a temple; every aspect of life was centered on the temple.

In addition, temples served as educational centers. The début of classic literature happened in the court of God. The kings of yesteryears promoted literature by commissioning great works as it was customary to do "arangetrams" in the prominent temple of the kingdom.

Temples also served as places of solace for the poor and needy. Visitors to temples were given food and ample space for resting. They were protected from natural forces and invasions.

The Mughal invaders of India understood the significance of temples and naturally bombarded the temples, not because of religion, but, because of the security they provided.

Location is key to a successful business in the modern world. Temples were successful because of *location*. The layout of temples and their locations exuded radiance that attracted people. This spiritual radiance of the temples gave visitors peace, tranquility, cultural education, and security.

In today's world, temples still serve as centers of cultural heritage. Most temples in the United States promote this through collective knowledge and stages to sustain the traditions. They may no longer serve as a fort, although they once were for physical security or community kitchens to satiate hunger, but they provide the spiritual and social support that we need to offset the stress and pressures of modern life.

Whether it is a ritualistic visit to a temple for an hour each week or a curious visit to learn and meditate for inner peace, we need to understand temples as the focal point of our lives. Swami Chinmayananda wrote this in 1958, "self discovery is the art of unveiling the Spirit by drawing asunder the veils of matter that now cover it." Every aspect of our lives may be crucial to us, but, in temples, they are the veils. These veils or "maya" can be driven away by our continued and enriched visits to the temple just as the sun's rays drive out the pacific coastal fog in Southern California.

In conclusion, Hindu temples play an immeasurably significant role in the understanding and practice of Hinduism. Hindu temples help us come together and aim for salvation through devotion and service; I believe that Hindu temples help us understand the confluence Man has with the Supreme Being. Hindu temples give us a vivacious soupçon of every aspect of life!