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In search of the holy

RINA ARYA

I just made the 8.55 a.m. train from Guildford to London. It was packed as usual but today I had to find an empty seat, as I needed to carry out something before my first day in my new job as an associate solicitor. I had spent the last three years job hopping, waiting to be promoted and then disappointingly being moved sideways. I was starting to believe that I had an inflated sense of my own abilities and that it was time to accept my fate. My faith in Lord Ganesha had always kept me going. As a child I'd collect elephant stickers, covering all my books, furniture and even my glasses case, as proof of devotion. Believing they had a special connection to him, I wanted to honour him in every way an 8-year-old child can. I was fascinated by his enigmatic face and ability to remove obstacles and I loved going to family weddings where I would come face-to-face with him. While others were involved in festivities I would pull up my chair next to his *murti* (statue) on the centre stage and ask about his day, offering to get him an extra yummy laddoo. The adoration of my *Ishta Devata* (chosen deity) turned into embarrassment in my teenage years as my peers would take the mickey out of the

collages I'd make of all the different Ganapatis I'd received from Diwali cards and wedding invites. The visual effects of the mounted images, some two-dimensional, others pop-outs, were dazzling and filled me with so much satisfaction.

Many Hindus have allegiances to their family temples in India, more out of a sense of nostalgia and family history than anything else. I was aware that a priest can conduct prayers on behalf of those who were unable to attend in person. I decided to contact my ancestral temple in India to ask for *puja* (worship) to be carried out. The Internet has bypassed the need for a detailed explanation over the phone – I was able to email the temple in question to ask for a *puja* to be carried out in my name and had explained to them why help was needed. It was carried out exactly four weeks ago at 9 a.m., Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), two days before my interview. I took a moment during this auspicious time to give thanks to Ganapati for being by my side and tried to imagine what was happening during the *puja*. Some ten days later I received an electronic receipt via email and a small white box of *prasad* (food blessed by



■ Ganesha in the Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Mandir Temple, Mumbai, India.

the gods) was sent to me as confirmation of my order. When I was offered the job, I felt confident that it was the result of divine intervention and blessings from the gods.

I had since vowed to visit the temple at my first available holiday, the Easter break, only five weeks away, so that I could carry out in person what had been done in proxy. But before that, on the train this morning, I needed to give *darshan* (an auspicious gaze) to Ganapati albeit virtually. I flipped open my laptop and accessed a link on my bookmarked list. The façade of my family temple flashed up and a black arrow beckoned me in. I switched off from the *Metro*-reading commuters either side of me and imagined I'd been transported to the dusty streets of Mumbai. One click of the mouse and I was through the door. Instructed to remove my shoes and cover my head, I headed to the main shrine with my trackpad. And there I stood before my Lord and bowed. Invited to give various offerings of flowers and *prasad*, I placed my gratitude at the feet on my saviour and initiated a circular motion on my trackpad that corresponded to the ritual *aarti* (the Hindu ritual of worship that consists of a lamp being circulated around the deity). As I gave praise I whispered my thanks, all the while gazing at the figure head before me. A bell appeared to the side of my screen and I clicked on it. As it started to ring, Ganapati blinked softly. I reciprocated and the bell quietened as the image faded from view. I found myself abruptly at the entrance to the temple that coincided with my train pulling into Paddington.

As I walked to work I remembered the first time I ever went to Shree Siddhivinayak Ganapati Mandir temple. It was in the early 1990s and it was the final day of Ganesh Chaturthi, a ten-day festival that occurs in the autumn, typically in September. The road that led to the entrance was winding and full of pilgrims. At the top of the road the temple came into sight but the path was obstructed by *sadhus* (religious ascetics) in deep meditation, crowding the stone steps and tiny black-faced monkeys who jumped on unsuspecting people. Walking in was a truly mesmerizing experience, a miasma of petals wrapped in sweet-smelling smoke. It was chaotic and orderly at the same time, and I followed mother's instruction as we stood watching the elaborate *puja* rituals.

The most captivating part was the bold but benign stares of Goddess Lakshmi and my hero Ganapati. Dressed in golden robes and decorated with petals, their unblinking almond-shaped eyes rested on me. I folded my hands and closed my eyes, trying to count the piercing after-images that bore into me. My contemplative state was interrupted by the shrill sound of a horn. I looked up to see the priest blowing into a conch shell that was almost the size of his head. We were summoned to throw the petals we had been given and in return were sprinkled with milk. On leaving, the sun was beginning to set and devotees were making their way down the road to the lake carrying statues of their beloved Ganapati for the final stage of the ritual, known as Ganesh Visarjan. These would be gently laid into the water and devotees would bid farewell to Ganapati as he returned to his sacred place on Mount Kailash. As I recalled the sensory spectacle that made such a lasting impression in my youth, I was struck by the paucity of engagement that I had to contend with in my life in England. India was the spiritual epicentre of Hindu activity. On every street corner people were communing with their gods – whether in their household shrine, in the temple, in their offices. Pictures of gods were all around them, plastered on walls, sold in shops as calendar art, god posters or other advertising material. In Britain, religious expressions were more restrained, which is why I felt I had to cover up the red thread that I received from a *puja* a month ago, or why I had to explain the presence of statuettes on my car dashboard.

Living in a diaspora felt like being on the margins. My religious life here was watered down and not as vibrant as it would be in India where I could walk down the streets and be visibly moved by the spectacles of devotion that lay before me. One of the most magical moments in my life was inadvertently touching a life-size pillar statue of Ganapati outside a temple in Bhopal. I was trying to find his face and, amidst the curves of his body, had to angle myself, resulting in me nearly losing my footing. I grasped his left shoulder and he restored my balance. The incident left my hands stained an orange red from the dyes used on the statue. I clasped them together, marvelling at the brilliance of the hue. This was the magic that I experienced in India. India was

authentic and untrammelled by modernity and consumerism. My parents had always told me about how straightforward their lives had been, with the simple values espoused by their elders and within the culture in general. It had never been their intention to spend the rest of their lives here but to see their children settled and then return to their mother country. They migrated in the mid-1970s; my father came first, got a job and a rented house, and went back for my mother two years later. I understood this was a common phenomenon shared by South Asians in Britain, sometimes known as 'the myth of return'. They had two lives: 'here' and 'back at home'. I longed to learn more about what it felt like to be 'back at home', as I felt like I lived in two worlds simultaneously. It wouldn't have been so bad if these two worlds had been mutually reinforcing but they were instead opposed in ideas and values – what one endorsed, the other discouraged. The mutual incompatibility made it difficult to embrace my dual cultures wholeheartedly.

■

The time had arrived for me to return to my family temple to give thanks in person. I had been in India for two days, had got over the jet lag and was buoyed up in anticipation of returning to my spiritual haven. The journey was long and I hired a driver for the day. As we entered the town I was struck immediately by the changes. Last time I was here market traders had their wares sprawled on the pavements, spilling into the roads. Locals stood in the middle of the melange, drinking tea and eating different delicacies. Cows and dogs weaved between the action, scavenging for food. This hub of activity had lessened. The traders had now gone and there were endless rows of shops. I spotted the beginnings of a metro station being built and was told, after I asked, that this was a way of cutting the number of car users and hence pollution. As we drove on I saw new developments that surprised me: a shopping mall with a glass-topped roof and a swanky lift at the entrance. Security guards armed with a range of weapons searched the bags of shoppers. From a block down sprung a new four-star hotel. We were stuck in traffic for five minutes and during this time the grand gilded doors were intermittently flung open to reveal

opulence. I started to recognize street signs and knew we were nearing our destination. Expecting this bizarre consumer landscape to give way to holier sights, I was shocked to see more examples of globalized offerings – fast-food joints, mobile phone shops and cafés with names that resembled many of the franchised chains I was accustomed to. I decided to make it on foot so that I could spend more time immersed in these alien spaces. I don't know what I was expecting to find but I was distinctly unimpressed by the insipid behaviours of crowds as they haggled over the newly released iPhone. Out of curiosity I stepped into one of the fast-food shops, wondering what was on the menu given that this was a Brahmin-populated town. Chicken was the only meat on the menu. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I reached the winding road leading up to the temple – too narrow for cars but wide enough for street sellers selling fake Gucci bags and shades. There was little trade today and they sat on stools, smoking and drinking chai. At the bottom of the road the temple came into view. The steps looked newly refurbished and were glistening white in the sunlight. There were a few sadhus on the top step chanting, but no monkeys this time. As I entered



■ A figurine of Ganesh.
Freelimages.com

the temple two priests greeted me and took a donation. I spent more than an hour deep in prayer, relishing the opportunity to gain blessings from the deities in person. It was eerily empty, meaning that I could gain a full view of each deity as I gave *darshan*. Fulfilling my mission to come here I felt happy as I left. On leaving the building I saw a number of balloons of different colours and shapes. They appeared to be coming from behind the temple and on investigating their source I was led across a passageway to a busy street. Crowds gathered outside a shop front that was not yet visible. Children released balloons, watching them rise into the pink sky. What have I missed ...? Is there a festival here today ...? Is that why the temple was so deserted? My speculations were not helped by the growing numbers of people, mainly young couples and college-aged children dressed smartly. Deciding it would be futile to cross over to the other side of the road I waited intently for movement. As is the way with crowds eventually they would have to move, by force perhaps, or willingly. Whatever this place was, it would soon open its doors and reveal its mystery to me. Some half an hour later this happened. The doors were opened from inside by two young women wearing stripy uniforms and hats, and the throng entered the building. It was only a few minutes before I was able to make out the visible signs of a name that filled me with utter bemusement. The shiny plastic M golden arches confirmed the identity of this place that the town had flocked to. It was the opening of the first McDonalds, a historic event indeed, and one that no doubt diverted people's interest from the more authentic place of worship I had just left. There were no words for my disappointment and shock. Sighing, I walked away, ready to be united with my driver. It was time to go home, wherever that was.

■

Back at work, I mused over my recent trip for months to come. Sometimes I was consciously trying to make sense of things; at other times it popped into my head as I was in the middle of mundane activities, like making a cup of tea or photocopying. All the while it was loss that I was faced with. I realized that I had built up or projected an idea of life in India that simply didn't exist. Maybe it did at one time, or so my

vivid childhood memories would like to believe, but maybe that was more of the myth-making, the dispelling of dreams. Anyhow the hard and fast reality was that Mumbai was cut from the same cloth as London, insofar as global capital cities go; it was fast-paced, unfriendly and, dare I say it, in places spiritually void. The spirituality I had longed for, and found in the temple, was not evinced in surrounding life, but was more constrained. For my specific purpose of giving thanks in that temple, I had done my job, satisfactorily. My expectation of what this would feel like could not have been more different. I had set up India, my *real* home, or so I thought, to be an imaginary place that didn't exist. Likewise, I had closed off my current life from expressions of my faith for fear of not being understood or for being discriminated against. I resolved to challenge my fears, confront them head on. It was my office space and I could decorate it as I liked. If the presence of Ganapati could restore my peace then I should let him do his job.

The next day I brought in a small brass statue that I placed on my window ledge and covered over with an overturned plastic box to protect from harm. I took out of my bag one of my most prized possessions, carefully unfolding the collage of Ganapatis I'd collected over the years. To others this may be a memento from childhood, like one's first hand print, or a family picture, but to me it was a reminder of all the times of discovery I'd picked out the image of my idol in among stacks of cards, calendars and other papers piled high. I remembered the ritual undertaken every time, with each image. After being granted permission to remove the image I would first clean the card, gently but thoroughly, and then either cut around it, or detach it, if it was a pop-up. The growing mass of images would be then carefully arranged and rearranged to make the most elaborate collage I could imagine. I had always kept it safe but it had, over the years, become a bit tattered around the edges. It would now take pride of place on my wall, above my desk, ready to be illuminated by my lamp. In a matter of minutes, my temple, my peace of mind, had been relocated. The special feelings I carried around about my faith no longer needed to be deferred to a different time or place, but were with me, in the here and now.