

Namaste Diyal Family,

I wanted to thank you for letting me come to your home for the puja worshipping Durga, Ganesh, and Hanuman, October 1, 2011 at 11:00 am. I found it was so interesting how a person could easily tell who the pundit was. He was the only one sitting on some sort of chair, a bleacher-seat style; he was the only person with a prayer/hymns/ritual book. The pundit also did most of the talking and directing the family on what they needed to do and how they needed to do it. The pundit was in a full-body, white robe and red scarf, which made him stick out since all of the other men (5 of them) were wearing jeans and t-shirts. All of the females (7 of them), excluding myself, were wearing very colorful and bright saris and kurtas. It was also very easy to see which of the women, such as Mrs. Diyal, were married because of their red sindoor on their forehead. No one was wearing shoes because we had to leave them outside, and I found this very invigorating because it was unlike any other religious experience I have ever taken part in.

When I first walked into your home, I was taken back. It was interesting to see the hardwood floors covered with two blankets in the living room and dining room. I was not expecting all of the furniture to be removed such as the couches, table and chairs, and the television. It was nice to have been able to sit with the other attendees to observe your family and the pundit perform the ceremony. It was interesting to see the three of you facing the statues and the front door, while the pundit sat to your right and to the statues left. It was fascinating to learn that all of the offerings of fruits, rice, sweet milk, water, nuts, and baked goods were placed there by your family in bowls and on plates behind and on the table the statues were on, because

they were going to be offered to the Gods. They were ready for the pundit to praise and give to the Gods for you. In the Uttarakhand regions, the women provide the offerings of fresh fruit, vegetables, grains, nuts, and money on platters to the priests (Mountain Goddess: The Small Pilgrimage, RDR 192, 42). It was hard to see the statues because I was facing their backs. I did not have time to get a good look at them before the ceremony began and once the ceremony ended, they were quickly put away. The three gold statues worshiped were beautiful. Durga was your largest statue, and looked beautiful, yet fierce with her six arms making a circle, with the top arms arching up, the middle arms straight out, and the bottom arms arching downward while she was on a lion. Ganesh was sitting down with his legs crossed with only one elephant head/face. He was to the left of Durga. Hanuman was a slender statue with a monkey face and was standing up, and was to the right of Durga.

There were two parts of the puja that I found very interesting, when Durga was worshiped and when the prasad was given out. It was interesting to see how you worshiped Durga because you worshiped both inside (using the statue) and outside (using the flags). First, you praised and gave offerings to the Durga statue inside. The offerings were sweet milk, water, rice, flowers, and clothes. A song is sung to Nandadevi in the Uttarakhand region that goes, "You'll worship Mother's feet with milk and rice... (Mountain Goddess: The Small Pilgrimage, RDR 192, 40)." This is similar to how you put sweet milk and rice on/at the feet of Durga statue. After Durga was praised inside, you went outside and praised Durga again. This time using flags as you object of praise. The flags were praised using water, coconuts, coconut milk, lime, and lime juice. The water was poured all around them, the coconuts and limes were cut open outside by Mr. and Mrs. Diyal, and the fluids from each were poured on each

side of the flag stand. It was also neat how you used a metal pan, sort of like a pie pan, which had a fire in it and was used to make circles around the flags. It was interesting how the pundit told all of you what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and sometimes which hand you needed to use to perform each of the actions. When worshipping Nandadevi in the Uttarakhand region, the rituals and customs take place in the villages/towns square. The priests are the ones who sing the songs and it seems that anyone in the village/town can participate in prasad as long as they can provide offerings (Mountain Goddess: The Small Pilgrimage, RDR 191-2, 40-43).

The giving of prasad was very interesting. The ceremony seemed to just end. I was unable to understand anything that was being said, and did not realize the ceremony was over until the females started to gather the food that was laid out for the Deities to prepare it for prasad. After the ceremony, the pundit put away his stuff (the string/yarn, the statues, and his hymnbook). Mr. Diyal, your son, and the pundit relaxed and talked in Hindi, while the females got up and prepared all of the offerings for prasad. Prasad is about eating the leftovers from the Deities. I did not realize it was so important that a person eat some of the prasad. "Prasad is the edible 'grace' (the theological meaning of prasad) of a deity who has heard the worshiper's petition (Mountain Goddess: The Small Pilgrimage, RDR 192, 42)."

I did not understand almost anything that was being said. The pundit read from Sanskrit. The only words I understood were the names of the deities, such as Ganesh, Durga, Lakshmi, and Shiva. Sometimes it seemed that the pundit was singing or saying things in a rhythm, but all of a sudden, the rhythm would change. I asked if he was singing, but I was told that, "It's more of him speaking very fast." One of the only

things that I was beginning to catch on was towards the end, when the pundit says "Swami Ki" everyone says "Jai" together.

I enjoyed the experience very much. The only thing that would have contributed to greater enjoyment would be if I spoke Hindi. Furthermore, my attention was most drawn to how you placed the offerings on and/or next to the statues. For instance, how you would each pick the rice up with one hand, but poured out using the other. I also noticed the way you placed the flowers dipped in something in a specific way on the statue. It was very beautiful and intriguing how it was done. The entire time I was there, I was thinking that I wish I knew what was happening, what was being said, and that I had a better view. I could also tell how important it was to you for everyone to eat some prasad. It seemed that it made you reflect on the practice and your Hindu community. Something that you may have only thought about at that time, but maybe it was something that you continue to think about, much as I do.

Sukriya aur bahut pyar ke sath,

Daniella Culbert