

A Passage in India



Reflections... transcending our comfort Zone.

Pilgrimage to Chidambaram temple, the temple of Nataraja, the Dancing Siva. South India January 2012

Day 2 of our pilgrimage.

We were immediately flung into the extraordinary. A visit to the temple at night to experience the divine presence (darshan) of Nataraja, the dancing Siva.

Our first time wearing saris-we went for wrapping at one of the tour leader's rooms. French doors opened onto a balcony, the breeze floating in on the sunlight was gorgeous on a hot evening.

My turquoise sari was *stiff* silk and hard for the attendant to work with. People said I looked beautiful, but the sari felt bunched up and not falling well. A bit like me! An

adjustment was made just before leaving the hotel & I felt much better, ready for the journey.

We walked along the dusty roads, the air filled with a chorus of sounds of horns from scooter, bus and buggy ringing out their warning of their presence on the road ---to be aware and stay out of the way. We sashayed along in our brightly coloured saris in single file sweeping and swaying, somewhat oblivious to the street dangers...

After about 10mins we arrived at the temple. No grand entrance from the main road—it was hidden at the end of a narrow pedestrian-only street lined with vendors on either side selling brightly coloured flowers and trinkets and bowls of vivid red and yellow powders.

We took off and then left our shoes near the temple gate at the appointed place with quite a lot of walking left to do. It was dirty & gritty on the feet. The temple entrance opened onto a courtyard & we marched steadily forward to an inner gateway with a long entrance section, beggars were sitting on both sides. Men and women but mainly women. I remembered the movie '*Water*' and realised the women were probably widows. We'd been strongly advised to not give to anyone begging, on the basis that no-one goes hungry in India, everyone has a meal by the end of the day. The main deterrent to giving --was give to one and you'd be surrounded. I walked past the beggars following the instructions, but felt I just couldn't blindly follow this advisement in the case of widows. As I am one myself I couldn't ignore their plight, so decided to discreetly drop off some money to one or two on the way back, particularly to one long grey haired desolate woman bent over her begging bowl in what looked like deep despair. So I put some money in an easy-to-reach place for on the way back.

We entered the temple proper. It was cavernous dark stone with soaring pillars and wide walkways filled with masses of people rhythmically moving along. The air was filled with the sound of drums and conches being blown, but far away in the distance.

Our group was guided around the perimeter of the temple before heading to the Nataraja inner temple. Our guide, the Prof, was showing us some older versions of the Nataraja in different locations on the perimeter. Like any dancer it's not a static form. As we were studying one.....the sound of drums and conches and cymbals got louder and louder and louder---a procession of people paced quickly around the corner

toward us. Deafening and more deafening the clanging of cymbals became-- rising to a Roar as more and more people came, moving like a rapidly flowing river, we had to move to the edge to allow them space to run by. Then louder, even louder came the sounds and around the corner appeared a carriage of a Deity being carried by some men with others running alongside playing the conch to the deity and others beating the drums. We scrunched deeper into the walls and watched the roaring energy go by...

I felt stunned and speechless & overwhelmed with the intensity of this alien procession and dance. A tide with a purpose that disregarded anything in its way, like a tsunami of unkempt euphoria. All my senses were bombarded. Our group looked blasted.

We moved on to another section and sat down and rested in what was the most ancient part of the temple. I closed my eyes and sat quietly, we all did. It was damp and dark, water trickled down the ancient walls. I sensed the energy of Vedic rituals from the distant past in this same temple area, sensed human and animal sacrifice..The unspoken history was seeping into my awareness. I felt revulsion.

Pretty soon we were up again and moving on to the Nataraja temple itself for the evening Arati ritual. The young Brahmin priests called us up the steps and one by one we entered via an ancient grilled doorway. An entrance for the privileged. I felt water under my feet and other squelchy unrecognizable textures in between my toes. My body recoiled but my mind made me carry on over whatever was down there.



Like everybody else we lined up either side of a narrow passage leading into the inner sanctum of the Nataraja. A huge statue filled the space -In his hands were rubies and gold. Arati was fiery and hot, we could see the Brahmin priest waving the tray of lights in front of the large statue, chanting incomprehensible mantras, which was somehow

very compelling. After the ritual he anointed our foreheads with sacred ash from the fire, energized with divine grace from the deity. This powerful esoteric gift was the profound point of the night, hard for us culture shocked Westerners to take in.

Feeling very tired by now we made our way down the steps and started our walk home. I got the money ready for the beggar woman, couldn't see her-- thought she'd gone & resignedly gave it to another. Sadly in another stretch of walkway I saw her, but had no money ready.

"Tomorrow' I committed to myself.

Contemplations

We are here to experience our fullness but often we close doors in favour of feeling safe. Choose the comfort zone rather than take a risk. I admit to being reserved about some things but whenever I have gone outside my zone of familiarity I feel bigger as if I have tasted something new, developed my courage and character. Ended up understanding more about the complexity of being human and more able to hold paradox. It ain't black and white!

The East West thing is still a very big chasm culturally. We have a pretty arrogant belief here in the West that our bright minds have the contemporary answer to living successfully and we export that globally. Yet the inner emptiness is a well known problem shown by increased mental illness.

Travelling to less known parts of the world takes our blinders off. In India the connection with the divine is a part of daily life that brings comfort and hope, even in the most humble village there will be a Goddess to honour with altars and pujas. Rituals can take us to a felt sense of awe, open our primal unconsciousness beyond the intellect and mind. The impact of the temple experience; the sights, sounds and textures; pleasant and unpleasant; the roar of energy broke open mine...Discomfort is worth it! A bit of chaos to shake up old beliefs and learn something new.

Meditation. Let's honour our connection and compassion for each other in meditation, set aside our differences and embrace our Oneness.



Oneness Meditation: <https://youtu.be/Y1ZTvZkf66c>