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CORPORATE, BUSINESS, AVIATION, LUXURY & LEISURE TRAVEL MAGAZINE

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 Della
Townships

 x MAYRLIFE
ALTAUSSEE, AUSTRIA



**JIMMY MISTRY'S DELLA TOWNSHIPS BRINGS THE WORLD'S
PIONEER IN MEDICAL WELLNESS AND LONGEVITY TO INDIA**

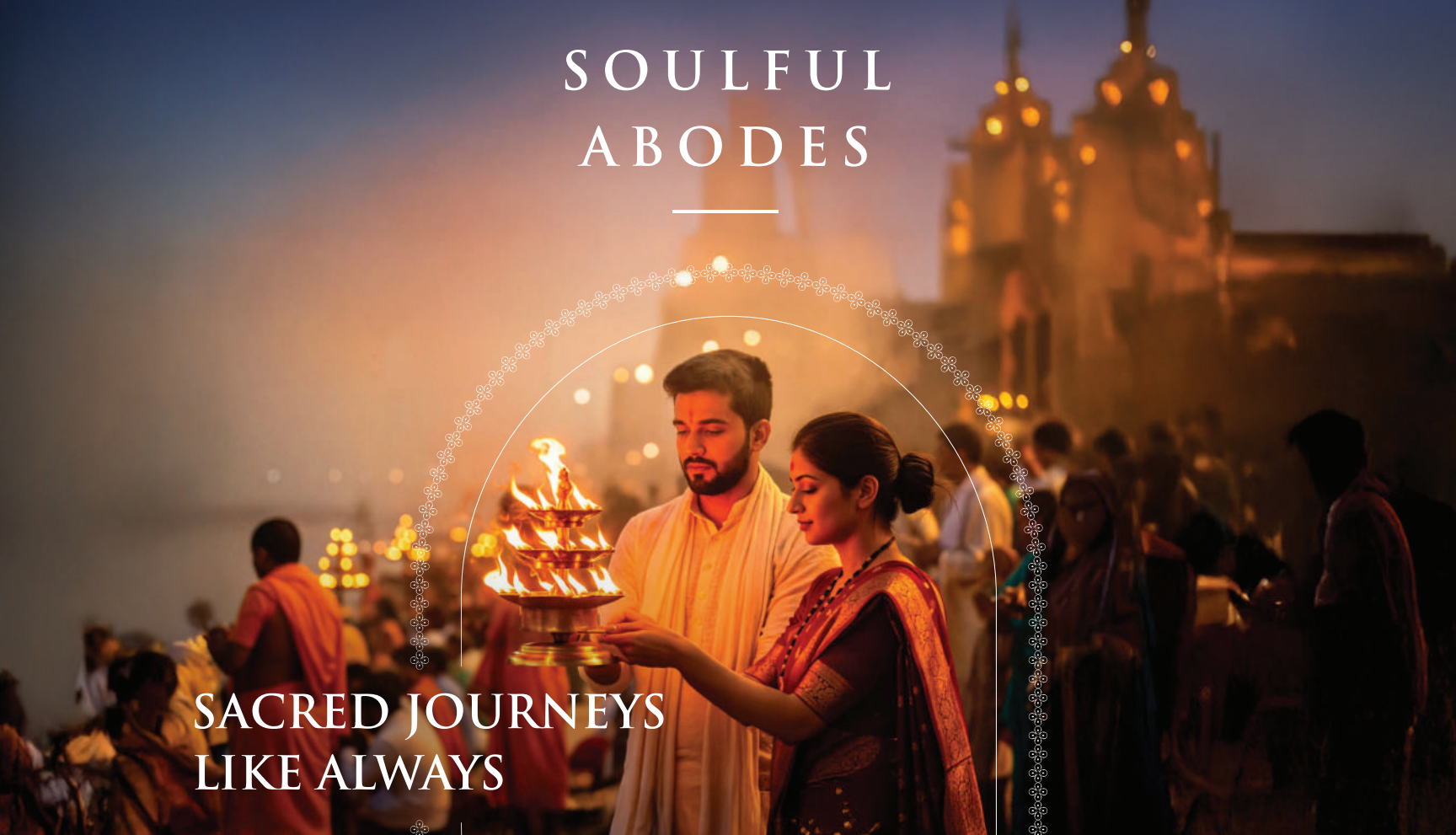
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JIMMY MISTRY'S DELLA TOWNSHIPS BRINGS THE WORLD'S PIONEER IN MEDICAL WELLNESS AND LONGEVITY TO INDIA

In an exclusive collaboration with MAYRLIFE, Altaussee, Austria, Della Townships, announces a new benchmark in Indian destination living - one where longevity, hospitality, sustainability, luxury wellness, converge in a single visionary township experience

ABOUT DELLA TOWNSHIPS

World's First Salutogenic Integrated Township. Each Della Township is a self-sustaining universe integrating Salutogenic Design, Wellness, Community, and a sustainable Environment in a way no other township in the world has ever done

"Our collaboration with MAYRLIFE, one of the world's foremost pioneers in Mayr-based medical wellness, marks a transformative step for Della Townships. By integrating the principles of preventive and individualised medicine into our Salutogenic Living philosophy, we are redefining how people will live, heal, and thrive in the future."

— Jimmy Mistry, Founder & CMD, Della Townships

Della's flagship European Medical Wellness-themed townships will first come to life in Ahmedabad, Nagpur, and Igatpuri, redefining wellness-led living in India. Across all 12 pre-launched townships, Della is integrating salutogenic living and wellness into the fabric of everyday life through purpose-designed ecosystems built around biophilic design, wellness zones incorporating air purity, water wellness, circadian lighting,

regenerative landscapes and democratizing public wellness spaces. Each township is curated according to its theme and scale, bringing together preventive wellness, bio-hacking regenerative therapies, human performance, movement and cutting edge longevity sciences in a way that actively enhances health, vitality, and quality of life.

This vision is expressed through a structured wellness framework. Wellness theme-based townships have CAT A framework that represents a 30,000 sq. ft. full-fledged Wellness Pavilion within a wellness-themed resort offering 50+ therapies. CAT B is a 15,000 sq. ft. Wellness Pavilion integrated with resort experiences, offering 40+ therapies. CAT C is a 15,000 sq. ft. Wellness Pavilion focused on day-clinic therapies, offering 30+ therapies. CAT D is a 7,500 sq. ft. compact Wellness Pavilion with a 24/7 spa and wellness day clinic, offering 15+ therapies. Together, these formats reflect not just a wellness offer, but a scalable medical and lifestyle infrastructure designed to travel across destinations without losing depth, ambition, or identity.

"Every Della Township will feature a world-class medical wellness facility, bringing the power of longevity science and holistic living into everyday life — truly adding Years to Life and Life to Years."

— Jimmy Mistry, Founder & CMD, Della Townships

Della Altaussee Medical Wellness Pavilion

“

As A Design Futurist,
I Don't Follow The Future, I Design It.
The World Doesn't Need Another Real Estate Project.
It Needs A New Way Of Salutogenic Living, Blending Design,
Wellness & Purpose.

Della Townships Are My Blueprint For That Change.
Where Every Township, Becomes A Catalyst For Social, Economic, & Human
Impact. Each One Redefining How

India Lives, Works & Dreams.”



JIMMY MISTRY

FOUNDER & CMD,
DELLA TOWNSHIPS



Della Townships ©



Della Resorts Becomes the Wellness HQ

Nowhere is the promise of the Della Townships x MAYRLIFE collaboration more tangible than at Della Resorts, which emerges as the Wellness HQ of Della Townships — the place where the philosophy of salutogenic living becomes fully experiential. This is where hospitality becomes the gateway to preventive health, where the township's larger wellness ambition begins to feel immediate and immersive, and where the collaboration can be encountered not just as an idea, but as a lived experience.

HOW DELLA IS BRINGING SALUTOGENIC LIVING TO LIFE

Della Townships is making a meaningful difference by incorporating the principles of Salutogenic Living into the very design of its masterplan, creating integrated ecosystems shaped around Green Zones, Blue Zones, Bio Zones, and Medical Wellness & Longevity Zones. Rather than treating wellness as an isolated amenity, Della is embedding it into the rhythm of everyday life, intentionally designing public wellness spaces that democratise access to health and well-being and transform the township into a living environment that actively supports vitality, spirituality, resilience, and longevity.

Green Zone

Open wellness spaces that calm the mind, renew the body, and bring people together — from the Khus Walkthrough, Breathing Pavilion, and European Mindfulness Zone to Vertical Gardens, a Community Garden, Nature Trails, the Longevity Garden, and a Jogging & Cycling Track. These spaces are designed not just for recreation, but to foster restoration, movement, mindfulness, and social well-being as part of daily living.

Blue Zone

The Blue Zone brings together a Saline Water Pool, Magnesium Pools, a Cold Water Plunge, a Regenerative Hydro Pool, an Infinity Pool, and an Olympic-size Pool, harnessing the healing power of water through immersive environments that encourage relaxation, movement, mindfulness, and emotional well-being. In doing so, Della elevates water from a leisure feature to an essential component of holistic wellness.

Bio Zone

The Bio Zone is a landmark collaboration with IIT Madras, integrating regenerative, future-forward solutions shaped by biotechnology, science, and sustainability, including algae and microalgae innovations and prototypes experimented at Della Resorts R&D Center in Lonavala, algae and microalgae installations, vertical algae walls, algae-based air purification systems, bio-reactive façades, vertical hydroponics, aeroponic gardens, smart greenhouses, and liquid trees for healthier and more sustainable environments. This is where Della Townships makes a distinctive impact - by combining wellness, environmental intelligence, and scientific innovation to create communities that are both healthier and more sustainable.

Medical Wellness & Longevity Zones

50+ Therapies including cryotherapy at -112 degrees Celsius alongside red light, infrared and hyperbaric oxygen therapy. Longevity therapies covering NAD+ IV infusion, stem cell support, Celloxy cellular oxygen therapy, telomere and bio-age diagnostics and healthy ageing suites. Blood oxygenation and ozonation bring together EBOO and ozone sauna, while water plasma and hydrotherapy include floatation tanks, ice plunge, snow sauna and India's first magnesium and saline heated pool. Sensory and mindfulness zones feature meditation and sensorium pods, chromotherapy and neuro-relaxation. Respiratory and detox therapies include the salt room, halotherapy, the Ammortal Chamber and breathing pods. Gut health incorporates the Mayr protocols, from Mayr cuisine and intolerance mapping to metabolic testing, while movement and vitality complete the circuit with medical massage and sleep pods.



Green Zone



Blue Zone



Bio Zone



Medical Wellness & Longevity Zones

DELLA TOWNSHIPS X MAYRLIFE: EXCLUSIVE COLLABORATION ANNOUNCED ON 1.11.25 AT DELLA TOWER, MUMBAI

MAYRLIFE Altaussee, nestled on the serene shores of Lake Altaussee in the Austrian Alps, is a world leader in medical wellness — offering medically supervised, personalised programs based on the century-old teachings of Dr. F.X. Mayr. These have evolved into modern Mayr medicine, combining cutting-edge longevity science with uniquely personalised nutritional strategies. The resort's core focus on gut regeneration, detoxification, and long-term health is achieved through a blend of traditional treatments, advanced diagnostics, and innovative therapies

With this exclusive partnership, Della Townships is bringing MAYRLIFE outside Austria for the very first time - introducing a full-fledged medical wellness setup integrated into India's first Salutogenic Townships. What makes Della Townships truly unique is their vision to combine what each partner does best. Della brings its strength in Design Innovation, Architectural mastery, and Hospitality Operations - guided by Design Futurist Jimmy Mistry's philosophy of Salutogenic Living, which transforms not just how people live, but how long and how well they live. Every aspect, from master planning to micro design, is crafted to nurture Health, Longevity, and Quality of Life.

Della Townships and MAYRLIFE are setting a new global benchmark - a living, healing ecosystem where architecture and medicine unite to create healthier, longer, and more meaningful lives.

For years, Altaussee has represented the kind of elite European medical wellness escape long favoured by celebrities and high-profile global clientele. Through this exclusive collaboration, Della is effectively bringing that world to India — not as imitation, but as a distinctly Indian, design-led, hospitality-rich, and township-scaled expression of it.

"This collaboration between MAYRLIFE and Della Townships marks a global first - where the precision of modern Mayr medicine is seamlessly integrated into daily living. The MAYRLIFE Health Concept combines cutting-edge longevity medicine with a uniquely personalised nutritional strategy. As the world's only health resort offering 100% individualised nutrition and treatment plans, we are now extending this expertise to enhance the Salutogenic Living model envisioned by Jimmy Mistry."

- Dr. Dieter Resch, CEO, MAYRLIFE

Della Townships and the World's Leading Celebrity Medical Wellness Brand MAYRLIFE, Altaussee, Austria, Enter an Exclusive Partnership for India

Launched 1st Nov 2025



(L-R) Shilpi Singh (Director, Della Group) | Jimmy Mistry, (Design Futurist, Founder & CMD, Della Townships) |

Pratap Sarnaik (Hon'ble Minister of Transport of Maharashtra) | Dr. Dieter Resch (CEO, MAYRLIFE) |

Ms. Natascha Sommerer (Owner & CEO, MAYRLIFE) | Dr. Niranjan Hiranandani (Chairperson - NAREDCO, CMD - Hiranandani Group) |

| Boman R Irani (Chairman - CREDAI, CMD Rustomjee Group) | Sunil Singhanian (Founder, Abbakus Asset Management Pvt. Ltd)

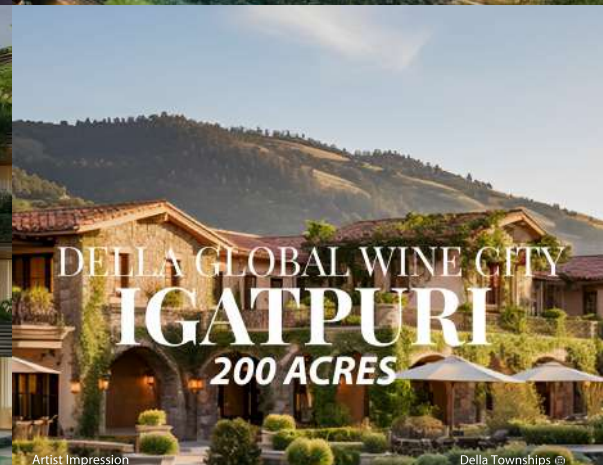
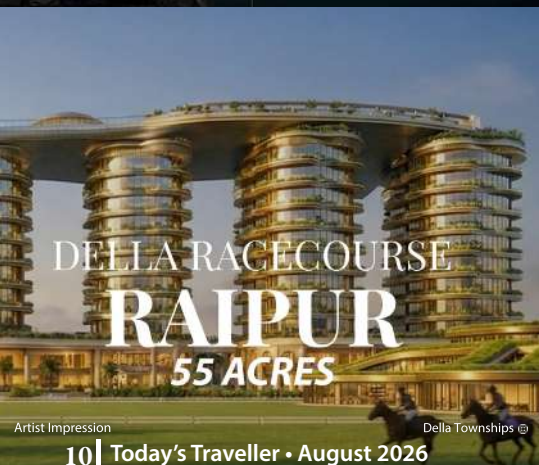
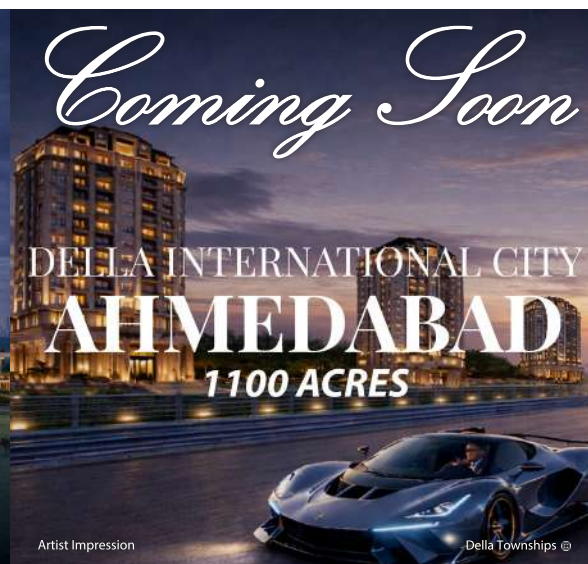


A NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR LANDOWNERS AND LUXURY WELLNESS ENTHUSIASTS

For landowners seeking to transform their parcels into theme-based townships anchored in wellness, longevity, hospitality, and destination value, Della Townships offers a proprietary CDDMO framework spanning conceptualisation, design, development, marketing and sales, and operations; and for discerning Luxury wellness enthusiasts who wish to experience this philosophy firsthand, Della Resorts, the Wellness HQ of Della Townships offers the most immersive expression of the Della x MAYRLIFE collaboration, where salutogenic living, medical wellness, and destination-led luxury are being brought to life in India.

Ultimately, that is what gives the Della x MAYRLIFE announcement its power. It is not simply saying that a new wellness facility exists. It is declaring that a new benchmark has arrived — one where travel, hospitality, medicine, sustainability, design, and everyday living are fused into a single, visionary ecosystem. If the most desirable destinations of the future are the ones that best support human flourishing, then Della is not just entering that future. Through this exclusive collaboration, it is announcing that it intends to define it. Visit www.dellatownships.com, email at info@dellatownships.com for more details

Della European Medical Wellness Townships



SPIRITUAL TRAVEL & SACRED JOURNEYS SPECIAL 2026



RADISSON ACROSS INDIA'S SACRED MAP

Nikhil Sharma, Managing Director & COO, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group, explains how Radisson is redefining spiritual journeys through comfort, connectivity, culture and thoughtfully located hospitality experiences across India's heartlands

TT BUREAU

India's spiritual tourism is witnessing remarkable growth as travellers increasingly seek journeys that combine faith, culture, wellness, and meaningful experiences.

Improved infrastructure, better connectivity, and renewed interest in religious and heritage destinations have transformed pilgrimage into a year-round travel segment, attracting families, solo travellers, and international visitors alike. Alongside this shift, the demand for quality hospitality has also grown, with travellers looking for comfortable stays that complement their spiritual journeys.

Recognising this evolution, Radisson Hotel Group has strengthened its presence across several of India's key pilgrimage destinations, offering guests world-class hospitality while serving as a gateway to the country's rich spiritual and cultural heritage.

"Spiritual tourism in India has evolved significantly over the years. Modern travellers are looking beyond traditional pilgrimages; they seek experiences that blend faith, culture, wellness, and comfort. At Radisson Hotel Group, we have strategically expanded our presence across key spiritual destinations

to ensure guests have access to world-class hospitality while exploring these culturally significant locations. As domestic travel continues to grow and infrastructure strengthens, we remain committed to supporting the evolving needs of spiritual travellers through thoughtfully located hotels and exceptional guest experiences," says Nikhil Sharma, Managing Director & COO, South Asia, Radisson Hotel Group.





Lobby, Park Inn & Suites by Radisson, Puri

One of India's most revered destinations, Varanasi continues to draw millions of devotees and cultural enthusiasts every year. Located close to the city's iconic ghats and the Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Radisson Hotel Varanasi provides guests with a comfortable base from which to experience one of the world's oldest living cities and its timeless spiritual traditions.

In Amritsar, the Group has two hotels serving travellers visiting the city's spiritual and cultural landmarks. Radisson Blu Hotel, Amritsar and Park Inn by Radisson Amritsar Airport offer convenient access to the Golden Temple, one of Sikhism's holiest shrines, while also providing a base to explore the city's rich heritage and attractions.

With Ayodhya emerging as one of India's fastest-growing pilgrimage destinations, Park Inn by Radisson Ayodhya is well positioned to welcome the growing influx of visitors travelling to the city. Likewise, Radisson Hotel Prayagraj, located in the city of the sacred Triveni Sangam and the world-renowned Kumbh Mela, offers travellers a convenient and comfortable stay while exploring one of Hinduism's most significant centres of faith.

The Group's presence also extends to Vrindavan, where Radisson Hotel Vrindavan allows guests to immerse themselves in the city's spiritual atmosphere while enjoying modern comforts close to its temples. In Shirdi, Temple Tree Hotel Shirdi, a member of Radisson Individuals, provides devotees visiting the Shri Sai Baba Samadhi Temple with a peaceful retreat designed for relaxation after a day of worship. Radisson Hotel Nathdwara offers guests convenient access to the revered Shrinathji Temple, one of India's most important Vaishnav pilgrimage sites, making it an ideal choice for travellers seeking a comfortable stay while exploring Rajasthan's spiritual heritage.

On India's eastern coast, Park Inn & Suites by Radisson Puri offers guests convenient access to the iconic Jagannath Temple while allowing them to experience Puri's distinctive blend of spirituality, heritage, and coastal charm. Meanwhile, Indore serves as an important gateway to Central India's sacred circuit, including the revered Mahakaleshwar Temple in Ujjain and the Omkareshwar Jyotirlinga. Radisson Blu Hotel Indore and Radisson RED Indore provide travellers with contemporary hospitality and excellent connectivity, making them ideal bases for exploring these prominent pilgrimage destinations.



Suite, Park Inn by Radisson Ayodhya

In the Northeast, Guwahati adds another important dimension to the Group's spiritual tourism footprint. Radisson Blu Hotel, Guwahati is located a short drive from the Kamakhya Temple, one of India's most significant Shakti pilgrimage sites. The hotel's strategic location allows travellers to combine a spiritual visit with opportunities to experience Assam's rich culture, natural landscapes, and the Brahmaputra.

With a growing footprint across India's most celebrated spiritual destinations, Radisson Hotel Group continues to strengthen its commitment to this rapidly expanding travel segment. By combining globally recognised hospitality with locally relevant experiences, the Group is well positioned to meet the evolving expectations of modern spiritual travellers while contributing to the sustainable growth of India's pilgrimage tourism.



Dining Area, Temple Tree Hotel Shirdi, a Member of Radisson Individuals

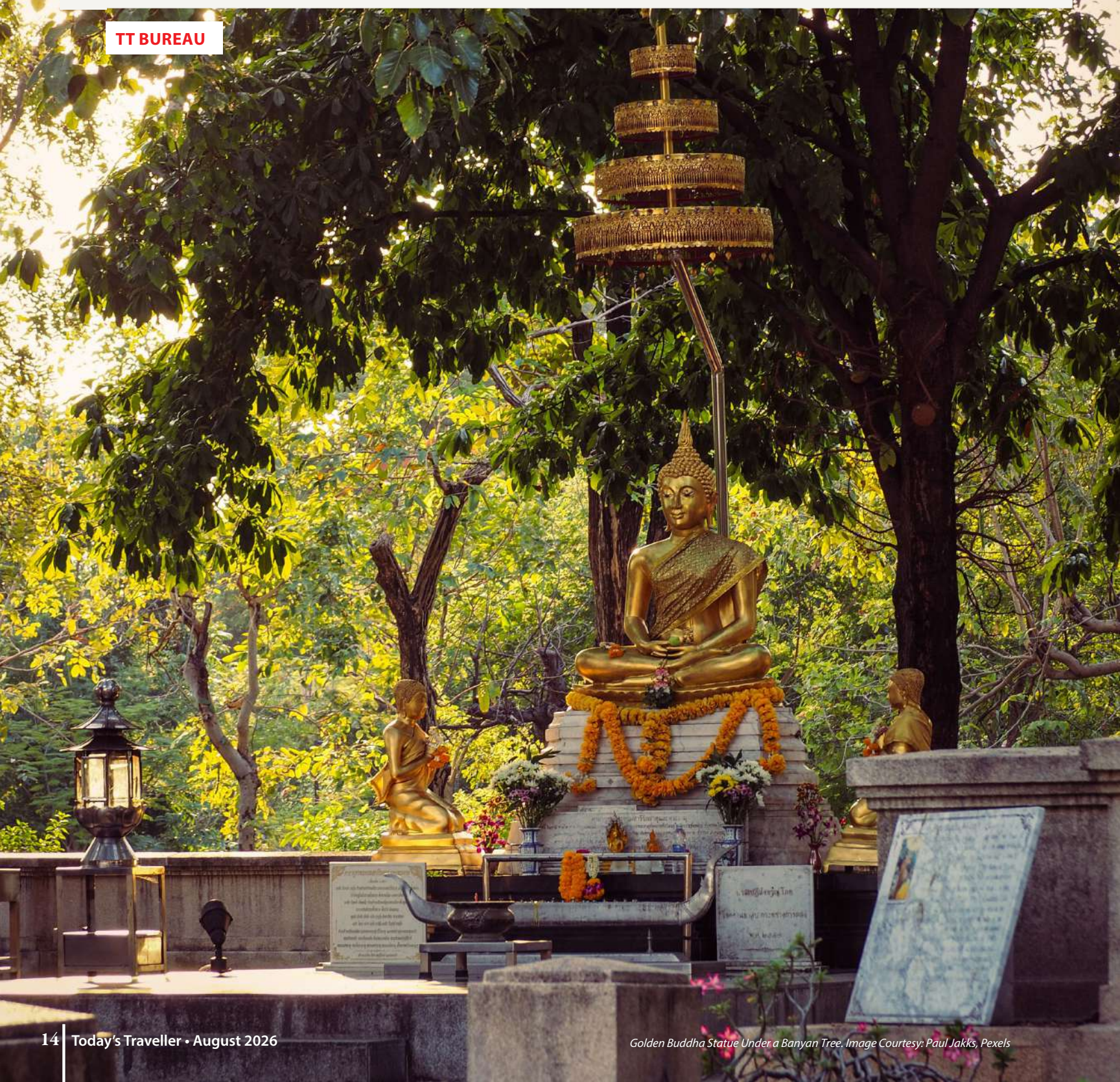


Pool Area, Radisson Blu Hotel, Guwahati

THE BANYAN: INDIA'S CANOPY OF FAITH

India's sacred banyan stands as the living emblem of myth, memory, shelter, faith and continuity

TT BUREAU



In India, the banyan is never merely a tree. It is a shrine, a landmark, a village square, a resting place, a storyteller, and a witness to generations. Known botanically as *Ficus benghalensis*, the banyan is India's national tree and one of the subcontinent's most culturally powerful presences. Its vast canopy, descending aerial roots and ability to grow into a grove-like organism have shaped its place in mythology, history, culture and heritage.

A mature banyan can feel like a living monument. Its branches spread outward, its roots fall from the air, and over time, those roots become secondary trunks. What begins as one stem slowly turns into a green architecture of pillars and shade. The banyan gathers age, memory and human presence. It creates a place where life gathers.

A SACRED PRESENCE IN THE LANDSCAPE

Across India, banyans are closely associated with temples, village shrines, pilgrimage routes and public spaces. Their shade forms a natural enclosure, almost like a room without walls. In temple courtyards, the tree becomes part of the sacred precinct. At crossroads and village squares, it becomes a place where people pause, speak, rest and deliberate.

Its status as India's national tree feels deeply fitting. The banyan represents rootedness, longevity, and a form of public life that has unfolded for centuries in the open shade. It has sheltered people, animals, birds, travellers, teachers and ascetics. In older settlements, it provided comfort in the heat and served as a natural centre for community life.

MYTHOLOGY AND COSMIC MEANING

In Hindu thought, the banyan carries some of its richest meanings. One of its most powerful forms is Akshayavata, the imperishable or undecaying banyan. Associated especially with Prayagraj and other sacred geographies, Akshayavata represents divine endurance and life beyond decay. The word akshaya suggests inexhaustibility, and the banyan's habit of renewing itself through aerial roots gives this idea a visible form.

The banyan is also linked with Kalpavriksha, the wish-fulfilling tree. A tree that gives shade, creates new trunks, shelters life and seems to multiply itself naturally becomes a symbol of abundance. It is not only a tree of prayer but a tree of provision. It offers protection, prosperity and divine generosity.

Another symbolic reading connects the banyan to the inverted cosmic tree described in the Bhagavad Gita, whose roots are above and branches below. This is not a literal botanical identification, but the banyan's visible root system makes it a compelling earthly image for that metaphysical idea.

Devotional traditions also associate the banyan with the Trimurti, folding Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva into its symbolic structure. Such references are best understood as poetic and theological readings rather than uniform scriptural claims.

RITUAL, FAITH AND WOMEN'S WORSHIP

Few rituals reveal the banyan's cultural power as vividly as Vat Savitri or Vata Purnima. In this observance, married women fast,

circumambulate the banyan, tie sacred threads around its trunk and roots, and recite the story of Savitri and Satyavan. The prayer is for longevity, family well-being, and marital devotion.

The ritual is tactile and communal. The tree becomes both altar and witness. Its long life is invoked as a blessing for human life. In circling the banyan, worshippers symbolically enter into its continuity, asking that the same endurance may flow into their homes.

Often, small images of deities are placed at the base of the banyan, beside oil lamps, flowers, incense and vermilion. Devotees fold their hands, touch the trunk, offer water, circle the tree and whisper prayers, treating its shade as a living shrine where divine presence feels close to human hearts.

This is also a powerful example of how Indian heritage lives outside built monuments. The sacred space is created by the tree, the circle, the thread, the story and the collective act of remembrance.

BUDDHIST AND JAIN RESONANCE

In Buddhism, accuracy matters. The tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment at Bodh Gaya is *Ficus religiosa*, the Bodhi tree, not the banyan. Yet the banyan still has a place in Buddhist sacred memory. It appears in post-enlightenment narratives and is associated with shade, contemplation and teaching. The Buddha is said to have sat beneath a banyan during the weeks after awakening, giving the tree a role in the wider landscape of reflection.

Its canopy suggests calm refuge. Its roots suggest grounding. Its shade becomes a space where questions can be asked, and wisdom can unfold.

Jain tradition also invests the banyan with meaning. Akshayavata has Jain associations as well, and Jain sources preserve banyan-



Banyan Trees Hold Profound Spiritual and Cultural Significance in Bali, Indonesia. Image Courtesy: Camvaughne



A fully Grown Banyan Tree in Rioja, Peru's Rainforest. Image Courtesy: Bill Salazar, Pexels

linked stories around Tirthankaras, meditation and enlightenment. In this context, the tree symbolises stability, detachment and disciplined inwardness. These qualities echo Jain ideals of restraint, nonviolence, ascetic focus and purity of attention.

FOLKLORE, VILLAGE LIFE AND HERITAGE

The banyan's historical life is as layered as its roots. Even the English word "banyan" carries a social memory: early European travellers in India noticed that traders, or banias, often gathered beneath these vast shade trees to conduct business. The name of a merchant community gradually became attached to the tree itself, linking the banyan to exchange, rest and roadside sociability.

Some banyans became famous sacred landmarks. At Prayagraj, Akshayavata, the "imperishable banyan", is woven into the sacred geography of the Sangam and the Allahabad Fort complex. Pilgrims

have long regarded it as a tree of darshan, immortality and merit, while its association with Patalpuri Temple shows how a living tree could become part of a fortified, royal and ritual landscape.

In Gujarat, Kabirvad, on an island in the Narmada near Bharuch, is associated with the 15th-century poet-saint Kabir and has developed into a pilgrimage site and remembered landscape of bhakti. Near Kolkata, the Great Banyan at the Acharya Jagadish Chandra Bose Indian Botanic Garden in Shibpur became a colonial and scientific landmark; even after its original trunk was removed in 1925, its aerial roots continued to sustain the tree as a vast living colony.

The banyan's heritage value also survives in civic and intellectual spaces. The ancient Adyar banyan in Chennai's Theosophical Society campus became part of a landscape associated with spiritual debate, reformist thought and public discourse. Such trees show that Indian heritage is not confined to forts, temples and stone inscriptions; it also lives in shaded platforms, pilgrimage memories, botanical gardens, river islands and public gatherings.

A LIVING LEGACY OF SHADE

The banyan's importance continues in modern India. Ecologically, it supports birds, insects, mammals and wider biodiversity. Its figs are valuable to wildlife, while its canopy reduces heat and provides shade in urban and rural environments. Its roots can be powerful and disruptive in the wrong setting, yet that force is part of its character.

To stand beneath a banyan is to stand inside a living archive. Its shade holds prayer, debate, silence and rest. Its roots join earth and air. Its presence turns the landscape into heritage. More than a national tree, the banyan is a tree of gods, women's rituals, village councils, wandering monks, birds, stories and memory.



Vat Savitri

ITC HOTELS ENLARGES 'SPIRITUAL FOOTPRINT' WITH WELCOMHOTEL BODH GAYA

TT BUREAU

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Approximately 12 km from Gaya International Airport, the hotel places guests within easy reach of the Buddhist circuit's key sites — the UNESCO-listed Mahabodhi Temple, the ancient university ruins of Nalanda, and the international monasteries that dot the town. The revered Vishnupad Temple in Gaya lies close by, while a short drive brings travellers to Rajgir, home to the Jalmandir Temple on the Vaibhargiri hills, sacred to followers of Munisuvrata, the twentieth Tirthankara. Beyond this, the property serves as a gateway to Deoghar's Baidyanath Jyotirlinga and to Takhat Sri Patna Sahib in Patna, revered as the

birthplace of Guru Gobind Singh. The hotel emerges as more than a place to stay, standing instead as a thoughtful extension of the pilgrimage itself.



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VARANASI, UNSCRIPTED

Temples, ghats, shrines and ancient sites that define the spiritual geography of Varanasi

JEET BHATTACHARYA

Before sunrise, Varanasi is charcoal and silver. The Ganga holds the last of the night, boats wait in silhouette, and the ghats descend towards the water like an amphitheatre. Then a bell rings somewhere behind the riverfront. Another answers. A conch sounds, oars touch water, and the city begins to glow.

Pilgrims step into the river with brass lotas cupped in their hands. Priests unfold prayer cloths beneath fading umbrellas. Marigolds arrive in baskets, chai boils in blackened kettles, and incense escapes through temple doorways too narrow to notice at first glance. Morning is not announced in Kashi; it gathers, ritual by ritual.

Varanasi is also Banaras, and Kashi, each name carrying its own mood. It is Shiva's city, shaped by the Ganga and sustained by the promise of moksha. Yet its sacredness is never kept behind temple walls. It spills into lanes, settles on stone, travels through music and appears in the gestures of ordinary life. Here, devotion is not an event on the itinerary. It is the atmosphere.

ALONG THE HOLY STEPS

The best view of Varanasi starts on the river. At first light, a wooden boat glides past an extravagant array of ghats, palaces overhanging the water, shrines wedged between houses, stairways worn smooth by a thousand bare feet. The



city rises from the Ganga in ochre, rose, smoke and sandstone, monumental and intimate at once.

Dashashwamedh Ghat is already awake. Pilgrims bathe, photographers chase the light, pandits conduct ceremonies beneath striped canopies, and flower sellers thread colour through the crowd. By evening, its energy becomes spectacular. Brass lamps arc through incense-thick air during the Ganga Aarti, bells pulse, mantras rise, and hundreds of flames tremble on the river. From a boat, the ceremony seems suspended between water and sky.

Assi Ghat has a gentler tempo. Mornings bring yoga, music, students, walkers and unhurried cups of chai. Man Mandir Ghat looks upward as much as riverward, its historic observatory recalling an age when rulers studied the heavens beside a sacred current.

Between the celebrated ghats are quieter scenes, wet saris drying on steps, boys diving from platforms, a barber shaving a pilgrim's head, an ascetic watching everything and nothing. The riverfront refuses choreography, yet every fragment falls into rhythm.

IN THE REALM OF SHIVA

The journey towards Kashi Vishwanath leads into the heart of the old city. Stone lanes carry a steady flow of pilgrims past flower stalls, carved doorways and small shrines glowing beneath marigold garlands. Temple bells sound above the footsteps, fragments of prayer travel through the air, and with every turn, the chant of "Har Har Mahadev" grows stronger.

Kashi Vishwanath Temple is the spiritual pulse of the city. Dedicated to Vishwanath, Shiva as Lord of the Universe, it is home to one of the 12 Jyotirlingas and remains the defining destination for many pilgrims.

Inside, devotion becomes concentrated and immediate. There is the briefness of darshan, the press of the faithful, the scent of rose petals and sandalwood, and the sense that generations have arrived with the same longing. Beyond the principal shrine, Shiva appears everywhere in Kashi, whether it is neighbourhood temples, beneath old trees, beside wells and behind half-open doors. The city does not merely belong to Shiva. It seems to breathe in his presence.

THE CITY OF COUNTLESS SHRINES

In Varanasi, temples reveal themselves unexpectedly. Turn a corner and vermilion-streaked stone glows beneath a peepal tree. Look through a doorway and an oil lamp burns before a deity. A lane that appears domestic may open onto a shrine alive with bells, flowers and whispered petitions.

At Sankat Mochan Hanuman Temple, devotion feels warm and direct. Worshippers bring laddus and boondis, recite the Hanuman Chalisa and seek strength from the deity believed to remove distress.

Tulsi Manas Temple draws literature into the sacred landscape through verses from the Ramcharitmanas inscribed upon its walls. Annapurna Temple honours the goddess of



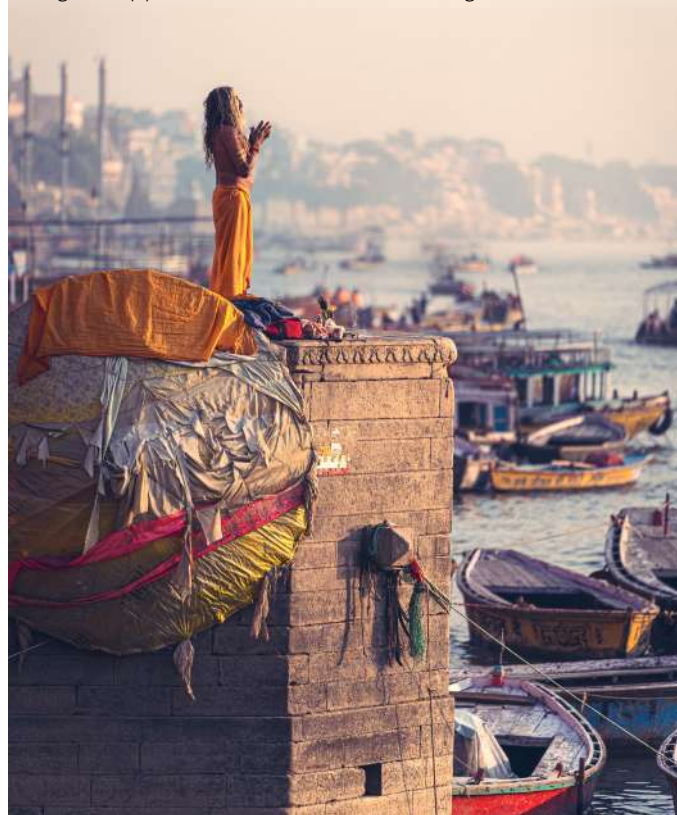
Ganga Dwar, Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Image Courtesy: Subhrajyoti Paul, Pexels

nourishment, linking grace with food, abundance and care. Kaal Bhairav, fierce guardian of Kashi, presides over the city with a darker magnetism; many devotees consider his blessing essential to their pilgrimage.

These places are not isolated points on a sightseeing map. They form a living constellation. Each changes the tone of its neighbourhood, each attracts its own rituals, and each adds another voice to Varanasi's devotional chorus.

WHERE LIFE MEETS LIBERATION

Then comes Manikarnika. Smoke lifts above the rooftops before the ghat appears. Wood is stacked along the lanes, funeral



A Person Performs a Morning Ritual on Varanasi Ghat. Image Courtesy: Dmitry Voronov, Pexels



Varanasi Munshi Ghat. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

processions descend towards the river, and pyres burn beside the water as they have through generations. Nothing here is softened for the visitor.

Yet Manikarnika is not shaped by spectacle. Its power lies in certainty. Within Hindu belief, death in Kashi carries the hope of moksha, release from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Fire becomes passage, the Ganga witnesses the city, a threshold between the visible world and what may lie beyond it.

Varanasi frames beginnings and endings together and does not request to turn away from each other. Death is not hidden at Manikarnika. It merges into the city's rhythm, solemn and startlingly human.

THE BUDDHA'S PAUSE

A short drive from the intensity of the ghats, Sarnath changes the volume. The lanes open, the crowds thin, and silence begins to feel architectural. Here, in the ancient Deer Park, the Buddha delivered his first sermon after enlightenment and set the Wheel of Dharma in motion.

The Dhamek Stupa rises with gravity above lawns and monastic remains. Monks walk beneath trees, prayer flags stir, and visitors lower their voices.

Sarnath adds a profound stillness to Varanasi's wider spiritual landscape. Amid its stupas, monasteries and shaded paths, the journey turns inward, carrying the enduring resonance of the Buddha's first sermon.

A CITY BEYOND TIME

Night returns slowly to the Ganga. Lamps float away like small constellations, music slips from distant courtyards, and silhouettes gather on the steps. The day should feel finished, yet Varanasi rarely offers a conclusion. Manikarnika's fires continue to burn.

This is a city understood in sensations rather than summaries, cool stone beneath bare feet, silk brushing past in a crowded lane, incense caught in the throat, the sudden brilliance of a shrine, sunrise turning the river to molten gold. Its contradictions are not resolved; they coexist—splendour and decay, noise and stillness, grief and celebration, time and eternity.

Varanasi stays with the traveller because it cannot be neatly consumed. It must be entered, heard, inhaled and allowed to unsettle. The temples, ghats, shrines and ancient sites are its visible landmarks, but the true journey happens in the spaces between them. There, amid bells, footsteps, fire and water, the sacred feels astonishingly alive.



Ganga Aarti at Dashashwamedh Ghat from Above. Image Courtesy: Rajography, Instagram

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MATHURA: A CITY WRITTEN IN FAITH

Mathura's sacred temples, living rituals and evolving hospitality reveal Braj's enduring spiritual power and appeal

TT BUREAU



The Yamuna emerges slowly through the morning haze. At Vishram Ghat, priests arrange flowers and brass lamps along the steps while pilgrims touch the water, murmur prayers and watch small diya drift with the current. Boatmen call out across the riverfront, shopkeepers lift their shutters, and the old city begins another day to the sound of bells and devotional song. This thriving sacred city is drawing a new generation of spiritual travellers seeking journeys rooted in devotion.

MATHURA IN MANY MOODS

Revered as Krishna Janmabhoomi, the traditional birthplace of Lord Krishna, Mathura stands at the heart of Braj, the wider sacred region encompassing Vrindavan, Gokul, Govardhan, Barsana, Nandgaon,

Mahavan and Baldeo. Together, these places form a devotional geography through which pilgrims follow Krishna's birth, childhood, divine play, protection of Braj and eventual triumph over Kamsa. The sacred landscape extends far beyond formal shrines, unfolding through riverbanks, hills, kunds, sands, pathways and settlements associated with episodes of Krishna's life.

Mathura's soul cannot be contained within its temples. It lives in the people who open the city each morning, in the flower sellers threading garlands, the boatmen guiding pilgrims across the Yamuna, the sweet makers preparing peda, and the families who return across generations. It lives in the ghats, the crowded lanes, the colours of Braj Holi, the songs of Raslila, the rhythm of parikrama, and the stories carried across villages, markets and courtyards.

Mathura's moods are as varied as its expressions of Krishna. It can feel chaotic and bustling around its major temples, gently calming beside the morning ghats, physically demanding along the Govardhan parikrama and joyfully festive during celebrations such as Holi. Across Braj, Krishna appears as child, beloved, protector and king, while flowers, swings, textiles, music, food and shringar shape devotion through the seasons. Mathura's soul ultimately lives beyond its sanctums, in its ghats, songs, markets, pilgrimage paths and people.

ITS STORIED TEMPLES

At the centre of Mathura's religious identity stands the Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi, the temple complex marking the site traditionally revered as Krishna's birthplace. For devotees, it recalls the night Krishna was born to Devaki and Vasudeva inside the prison of King Kamsa, before being carried across the Yamuna to Gokul.

The present complex is modern, yet its authority rests on centuries of belief, pilgrimage, and renovations. Pilgrims pass through security before approaching the Garbha Griha, which is believed to have been built over the prison chamber associated with the divine birth. The space carries an emotional intensity shaped by chanting, prayer and the belief that this is a place of immediate sacred presence.

During Janmashtami, the complex becomes the spiritual centre of Mathura. Fasting, bhajan, Raslila, decorated cradles and midnight worship build towards the hour associated with Krishna's birth. Within the wider complex, Keshav Dev Temple provides space for collective worship, while Bhagavata Bhavan extends the experience through shrines connected with Krishna, Radha and the wider Vaishnava tradition.

A short distance away, Dwarkadhish Temple presents Krishna in his regal form as the lord of Dwarka. Located near Vishram Ghat, the early nineteenth-century temple belongs to the Pushtimarg tradition and remains one of Mathura's most active centres of worship. Its courtyard, carved pillars, and painted details frame a deeply sensory ritual world in which Krishna's dress, jewellery, flowers and food offerings change through the day and across the seasons.

During the monsoon, the temple's Hindola festival transforms the space with elaborate swings, flowers, mirrors and textiles, placing Krishna within the mood of the rainy season.

The sacred rhythm continues at Vishram Ghat, traditionally associated with Krishna resting after defeating Kamsa. Pilgrims bathe in the Yamuna, offer prayers, board small boats and begin or complete the city's parikrama here. By evening, Yamuna aarti fills the riverfront with bells, chanting, brass lamps and floating diyas. Within Braj tradition, the river is herself a sacred presence intimately linked with Krishna's life.

Mathura's religious world also reaches beyond Krishna worship. Bhuteshwar Mahadev and Rangeshwar Mahadev reflect the place of Shiva within the city's sacred geography, while Dirgh Vishnu and Adi Varaha reveal older Vaishnava traditions. Gita Mandir presents Krishna as the philosophical teacher of the Bhagavad Gita.

Around these sites, flower sellers, musicians, sweet makers, priests, performers and guides sustain a wider devotional ecosystem. Raslila, Braj Bhasha poetry, Sanjhi art, bhog and changing shringar ensure that Mathura's temple culture is expressed through sound, food, colour and craftsmanship.



The Dwarkadhish Temple, Mathura. Image Courtesy: Uttar Pradesh Tourism



Sri Krishna Balaram Mandir, Vrindavan. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

THE NEW PILGRIMAGE ECONOMY

Pilgrimage has sustained Mathura for centuries, but the journey is beginning to look different. The old pattern of day trips, dharamshala stays and hurried temple visits is gradually giving way to longer, more considered experiences. Families, diaspora travellers, organised religious groups and affluent domestic visitors are seeking dependable transport, better accommodation and curated routes linking Mathura with Vrindavan, Gokul, Govardhan, Barsana and Nandgaon.

The sacred calendar keeps this movement alive through the year. Janmashtami draws pilgrims towards Krishna Janmabhoomi, while Holi spreads across Mathura, Vrindavan, Barsana, Nandgaon and Baldeo through distinct local traditions. Kartik brings lamps, chanting and parikrama, Govardhan Puja and Annakut fill temples with elaborate food offerings, and Radhashtami places Barsana and Radha-centred shrines at the heart of the season.

The expansion of spiritual tourism is creating a more varied hospitality market across Mathura and Vrindavan. Organised hotels are already serving the region alongside its extensive



Temple Architecture, Vrindavan. Image Courtesy: Vimlesh Tailor, Pexels

network of dharamshalas, ashrams, guesthouses and locally owned properties.

A CALENDAR OF CELEBRATION

Braj's sacred calendar keeps Mathura and its surrounding towns in motion through much of the year. Janmashtami remains the most important celebration, drawing large numbers of devotees to Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi for fasting, bhajan, decorated cradles and midnight worship. The following day, Nandotsav carries the joy of Krishna's birth into Gokul and other parts of Braj.

Radhashtami places Barsana at the centre of devotion, while the monsoon brings Jhulan Yatra, when temple deities are seated on richly decorated swings adorned with flowers, mirrors and textiles. Guru Purnima attracts pilgrims to Govardhan, many of whom undertake the demanding parikrama around the sacred hill.

Kartik introduces a quieter, luminous rhythm through lamps, chanting and evening worship across temples and ghats. Soon after, Govardhan Puja and Annakut transform devotion into elaborate displays of food offered in memory of Krishna lifting Govardhan Hill.

Holi is Braj's most exuberant festival season, unfolding across several weeks and several towns. Barsana celebrates Laddu Holi and Lathmar Holi, Nandgaon follows with its own traditions, Vrindavan brings flowers and colour into temple courtyards, Gokul marks Krishna's childhood, and Baldeo concludes with Huranga. Together, these occasions make Braj a living festival landscape rather than a destination shaped by one annual celebration.

FAITH STILL DEFINES THE JOURNEY

Mathura is entering a period of visible transformation. New infrastructure may shorten travel times, organised hotels may improve comfort, and curated itineraries may help visitors explore Braj more deeply. Yet the meaning of the journey will continue to be defined by the very things that have endured for centuries: faith, culture and devotion.



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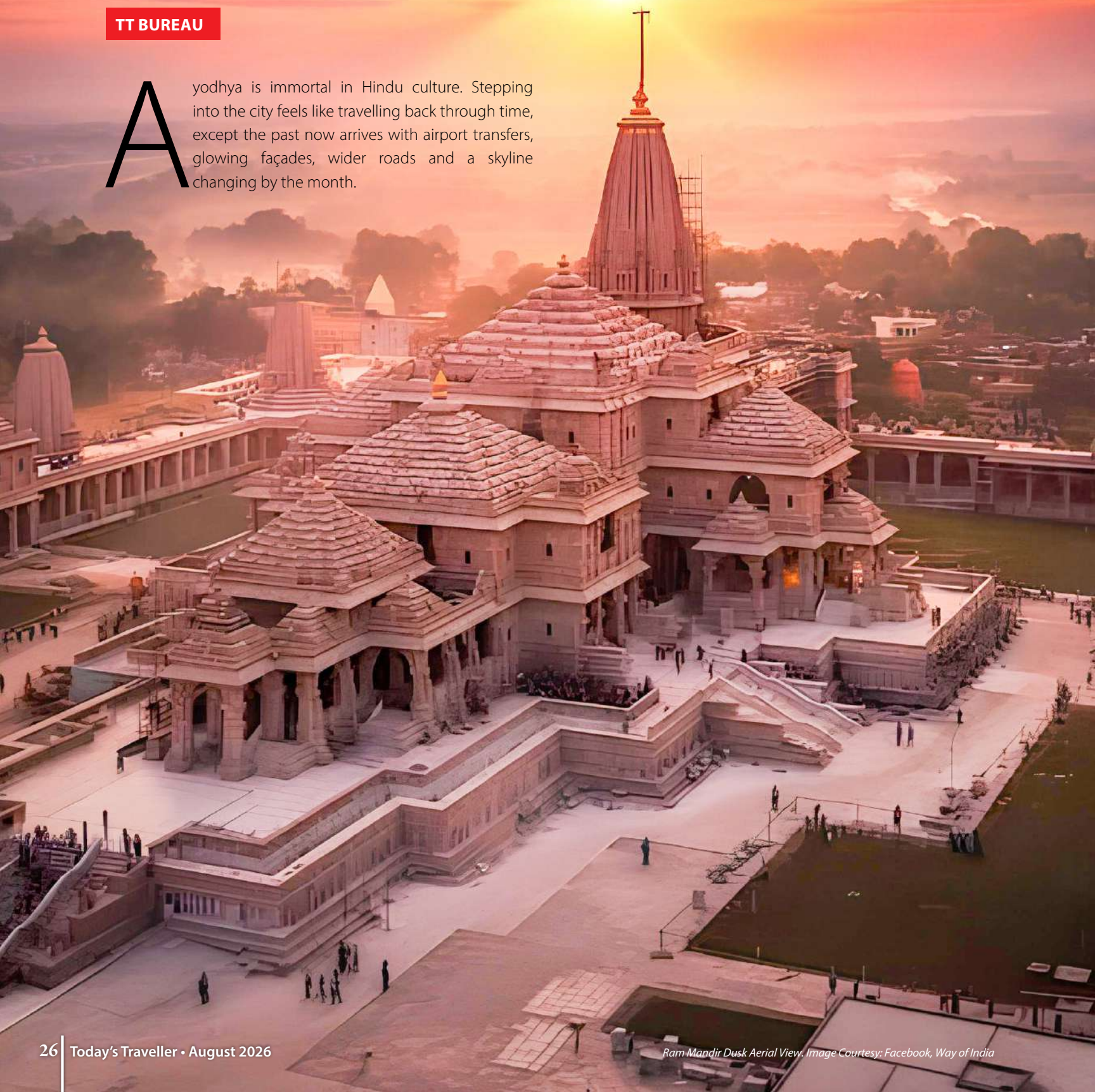
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AYODHYA: ANCIENT SOUL, NEW ENERGY

Ayodhya wears its ancient soul, glowing brighter as sacred memory meets a bold new rhythm

TT BUREAU

Ayodhya is immortal in Hindu culture. Stepping into the city feels like travelling back through time, except the past now arrives with airport transfers, glowing façades, wider roads and a skyline changing by the month.





Ram Mandir, Ayodhya. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

The first is acknowledgement. Generations have lived in the Ramayana, in bhajans, in Diwali lamps and family stories of Ayodhya. Then the present comes rushing in. Temple bells above traffic. Pilgrims with flowers, smartphones. Electric buggies past old sweet shops. The Saryu in the evening light. Ayodhya is having a moment, full throttle, ancient and emotional.

THE CITY THAT LIVED IN STORIES

Long before Ayodhya became one of India's biggest travel stories, it was already one of its most remembered cities. Hindu tradition places it at the heart of ancient Kosala and the Ikshvaku or Suryavanshi dynasty, whose royal line included King Dashrath and Lord Ram.

The Ramayana unfolds in Treta Yuga (the second yuga among the four main yugas of Hindu culture), yet the city's history is felt less through chronology than through a story known across generations: Ram's birth, exile, victory over Ravana and return home. Diwali lamps still echo that homecoming.

Known earlier as Saket, Ayodhya also carries Jain, Buddhist, Shaivite and Vaishnavite layers. Saints, poets and pilgrims have all left their imprint. Belief and daily life still share the same lanes.

RAM MANDIR: THE NEW CENTRE OF GRAVITY

The Ram Janmabhoomi Mandir is now the spiritual and tourism hub of Ayodhya. Roads lead to it, crowds mill around it, and almost every first-time visitor is asked the same question, 'When are you going for darshan?'

Security checks, flower sellers, prasad counters and long queues soon rearrange even the best-laid plans. Some pilgrims chant, some walk in silence. Elderly visitors walk with an almost unnerving concentration, whilst younger travellers take their last photographs as the sanctum nears.

And then the volume drops and the scale of the temple takes over. Darshan may be brief, but that's the magic of pilgrimage.

HANUMAN GARHI: STEPS, BELLS AND STREET ENERGY

Set in the heart of Ayodhya, Hanuman Garhi is reached by climbing 76 steps and ranks among North India's most revered Hanuman temples. The lane below is packed with flowers, saffron cloth, sweets, bells and monkeys watching the crowd with professional interest.

The climb is chaotic and full of character. A child counts the steps, a shopkeeper argues for his laddoos, and someone inevitably stops in the middle. Tradition holds that Hanuman watched over Ayodhya here, and the shrine still feels like the city's spiritual guard post.

KANAK BHAWAN: THE PRETTY PAUSE

After Hanuman Garhi, Kanak Bhawan feels like a change of playlist. Its courtyards, ornate arches, carved details and devotional music soften the pace instantly.

Tradition associates the palace temple with Lord Ram and Sita, describing it as a gift presented to Sita after her marriage. Beautifully adorned images of the divine couple occupy the main shrine, while the courtyard offers room to sit and absorb the details.

SARYU STATE OF MIND

The Saryu may appear to flow along Ayodhya's edge, but spend time beside it and you realise it runs through the city's emotional centre. Mornings are soft and devotional, with ritual dips, priests arranging offerings and boats slipping through misty light.

Evening changes the mood at Ram Ki Paidi. The ghats are lit up, the steps are full of families and vendors are selling flowers, lamps and chai through the crowd. As the aarti starts, bells are ringing, flames are rising, and diyas are floating on the water, each with a silent prayer. Sit on the steps, sip chai and let the riverfront unfold.



Hanuman Garhi Temple. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

THE SACRED LIST

Ayodhya's sacred circuit does not end with Ram Mandir, Hanuman Garhi and Kanak Bhawan. Those may be the headline stops, but the city becomes far more interesting once you move beyond the obvious and let its smaller temples, royal courtyards, riverfront shrines and storytelling spaces take over.

A Shaivite Pause: Nageshwarnath Temple brings a strong Shaivite element to Ayodhya's largely Ram-centred landscape. According to tradition, the temple is connected with Kush, the son of Lord Ram. The atmosphere is serene and steeped in local devotion. This is the sort of place that makes Ayodhya feel lived in, rather than staged.

Royal Colour, Full Volume: Dashrath Mahal turns the mood brighter. Colourful façades, decorated entrances, devotional music and a steady stream of pilgrims give the royal residence a lively, almost celebratory energy. Associated with King Dashrath and Lord Ram's childhood, it carries the memory of Ayodhya's royal household.

The Quieter Chapter: Treta Ke Thakur offers another connection with the Ramayana, with tradition associating the site with Lord Ram's Ashwamedha Yajna. The temple feels calmer, making it a welcome pause between crowded stops.

Poetry Takes the Lead: Tulsi Smarak Bhawan shifts the story towards poetry and performance. Dedicated to Goswami Tulsidas, traditionally credited with composing the Ramcharitmanas, it explores how the Ramayana travelled beyond scripture and entered music, theatre, art and everyday language.

The Epic, Reimagined: Nearby, the Ram Katha Museum continues that narrative in sculptures, manuscripts, paintings, costumes and regional interpretations of the epic. Together, these spaces tell us something fundamental about Ayodhya: the Ramayana here is not confined to a temple or a book. It survives in songs and paintings and festival stages and household prayers and stories retold across India and Asia.

Where the City Slows: Away from the busy lanes of the temple, Guptar Ghat has a quieter, more pensive atmosphere. The riverfront looks wide and unhurried, linked with Lord Ram's last departure from the earthly world. Walk up the steps as the sun approaches sunset and linger until the light begins to fade.

BAZAAR BEFORE BLESSINGS

Flowers, diyas, sandalwood, kumkum, copper vessels, prayer beads, sweets, idols and miniature bows spill across Ayodhya's temple side shopfronts. Some are bought for worship, some for gifting and some are too charming to leave behind.

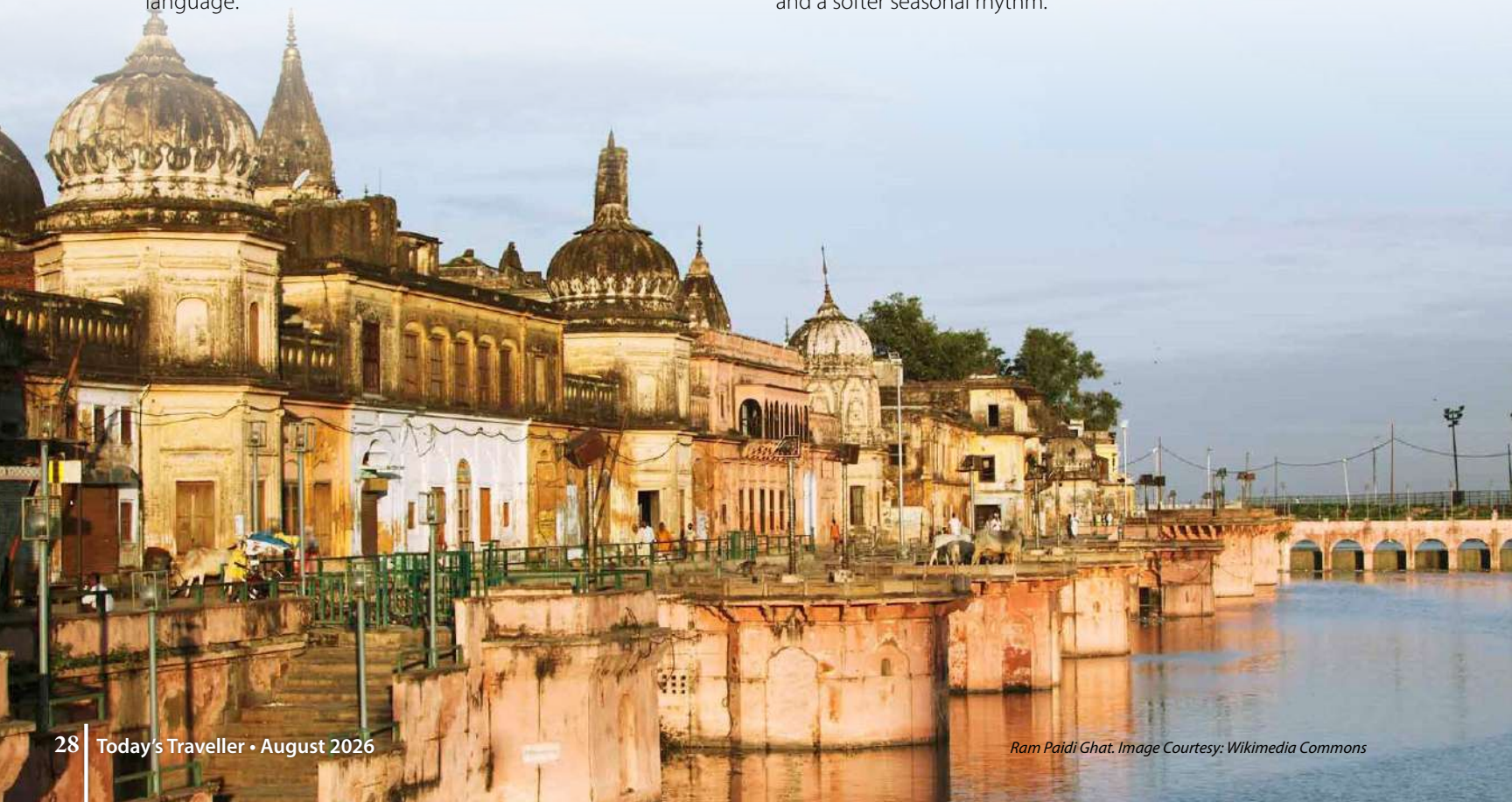
Sellers explain offerings, recommend prasad and carefully pack fragile keepsakes. Old family run stores sit beside polished souvenir shops.

Every garland, diya, brass bell and prasad box supports artisans, traders and generations of temple businesses. Shopping slips naturally between darshan, blessings and the next stop.

FESTIVAL MODE

During Deepotsav, Ayodhya goes full spectacle. Ram Ki Paidi and the ghats become a vast riverfront stage, lit by rows of diyas and animated by music, processions, cultural performances and aarti.

Ram Navami brings huge gatherings celebrating Lord Ram's birth, while Shraavan Jhula Mela adds decorated swings, music and a softer seasonal rhythm.





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Thirayattam - Bhagavathi Vallattu. Image Courtesy: Thirayattam Kerala, Flickr

WHEN THE GODS WALK

Kerala's embodied rituals transform human bodies and natural materials into temporary vessels of divine presence

TT BUREAU

After days of fasting, abstinence and ritual observance, a human dons paint, cloth, palm leaves, metal and fire. Layer by layer, ordinary identity recedes. The face becomes a sacred design, the figure expands beneath elaborate ornaments, and songs awaken the memory of a deity. When the crown is finally placed, the person who entered the ritual space is no longer a practitioner. Before the gathered community stands a god: visible, speaking and present.

WHERE THE DIVINE DWELLS

Across India, the sacred and the divine were never confined just to a temple or an idol. The divine is recognised and invoked in the mountains, forests, groves, fire, stone and drawings made on

cloth and floor. These traditions of divine embodiment sit inside this wider culture, expressing how the divine can be invoked into a body through ritual and tradition.

Across Kerala, traditions such as Theyyam, Thirayattam, Padayani and Theyyattu preserve this invocation of the sacred. Through inherited knowledge, natural materials and carefully ordered rites, the divine is given temporary form within a human body, a painted image or a structure made of palm and bamboo.

THEYYAM

Theyyam belongs to the landscape of Kannur and Kasaragod, where sacred groves, ancestral shrines and temple courtyards become spaces of divine embodiment. Its season extends from mid-October to late May, according to shrine calendars.

Preparation begins well before the practitioner assumes the sacred form. Fasting, abstinence, and dietary discipline ready the body to carry the deity within the shrine.

The ritual opens with thottam songs recounting the origin, suffering, death and deification of the figure being invoked. Transformation becomes visible through mukhathezhuthu, facial design concealing ordinary identity beneath red, black, white and yellow. Palm leaf skirts enlarge the body, breastplates reshape the torso, and the towering mudi carries the figure beyond human scale.

Once the divine form is complete, devotees approach for protection, healing, guidance and daivavakku, words received as the deity's voice. The Theyyam listens, blesses and may answer questions directly. Its pantheon preserves North Malabar's layered memory through goddesses, warriors, hunters, ancestors, serpents, animals, wronged women and local heroes. Muslim-associated forms reflect the region's cultural exchange.

Important centres include Parassinikadavu Sree Muthappan Madappura, Andalur Kavu, Palottu Kavu and shrines around Payyanur, Thalassery and Nileshwaram. Most appearances are seasonal, though Muthappan Theyyam is conducted regularly at Parassinikadavu. Many practitioners come from hereditary communities historically affected by caste marginalisation. During the rite, however, they become the highest sacred authority in the courtyard.

THIRAYATTAM

Thirayattam is sustained in the sacred groves and village shrines of Kozhikode and Malappuram. Its world includes local deities, ancestors, territorial gods and protective spirits. The season broadly runs from October to April, with many observances concentrated between January and April.

Before the ritual begins, the kavu is prepared and awakened through invocatory rites. Shrine patrons, hereditary practitioners and associated families fulfil inherited rights and responsibilities. Facial and body painting, headgear, ornaments, weapons, anklets and layered costumes create the kolam, the deity's visible form. Areca palm, tender coconut leaves and bamboo are combined with cloth, wood and metal.

Thirayattam is understood as trance worship in which a deity is channelled through a ritually prepared body. Bhagavathi, ancestral figures and local guardians may appear. The sequence differs among shrines. In some places, Vellattam appears during the day as a preliminary form, followed by developed kolams at night. The sequence may conclude with Chaanthu Thira or Chaanthattam, after which Kudikoottal closes the festival and restores the kavu to worship.

It should not be confused with Poothan and Thira, a separate South Malabar tradition of Valluvanad. Here, Thira represents Bhagavathi, often as Bhadrakali, while Poothan appears as her attendant spirit. Together they visit village streets, temple grounds and household courtyards during festival periods.



Padayani, Ritualistic Folk Art. Image Courtesy: letsgoformacam, Instagram

PADAYANI

Padayani centres on Bhadrakali, its principal narrative places the goddess after her victory over Darika, when the intensity of battle still remains. The ritual is offered to honour and calm that fierce energy of the goddess who has just triumphed over Darika. Through successive kolams, gods, spirits, animals, death figures, yakshis and comic human characters enter the temple courtyard, creating a supernatural and social world around her.

The tradition is closely associated with Pathanamthitta and Central Travancore, with a principal season between February and April. Celebrated centres include Kadammanitta Bhagavathy Temple, Kottangal Sree Mahabhadrakali Temple, Elanthoor, Othara and Kunnamthanam. Neelamperoor in Alappuzha preserves a related tradition of large ceremonial effigies.



Gulikan Theyyam Vellattam By Shagil Kannur. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons



Theeyattu. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

Padayani kolams are made with fresh areca palm spathes, cut, painted and joined into prescribed forms. Tender coconut leaves create skirts, hair, fringes and wings, while bamboo and strips of areca wood support larger structures. Bhairavi, identified with Bhadrakali, is usually the largest form. Kaalan introduces death, Yakshi appears as beauty or terror, Pakshi assumes bird form, and Marutha carries associations with disease, motherhood and protection.

THEEYATTU

Theeyattu includes distinct Bhadrakali and Ayyappan traditions and has no single statewide season. Performances follow temple festivals, hereditary obligations and votive commissions. Some Ayyappan observances cluster during the Mandala period between November and January.

Bhadrakali Theeyattu begins with a kalam drawn using rice powder, charcoal, turmeric, leaves and lime. The goddess first appears as a horizontal image, with her face, weapons and ornaments formed in loose powder. The hereditary practitioner later receives the mudi and assumes Kali's identity, placing the goddess in both the painted image and human body.

Kali recounts her battle with Darika to Shiva, represented by an oil lamp. During Thiri Uzhichil, fire is moved around the practitioner, making her heat and fury visible. The kalam is erased at the conclusion.

Ayyappan Theeyattu follows a different structure. An Ayyappan kalam is drawn, songs establish the mythology and the komaram, or oracle, circles the image, enters trance and eventually erases it. Divine presence moves between image, narrative and oracle.

Important Bhadrakali Theeyattu centres include Pallipurathu Kavu, Thrikkariyoor Mahadeva Temple, Panachimangalath Bhadrakali Temple, Vanarkavu and Puthukulangara Bhagavati Temple. Ayyappan Theeyattu is especially associated with Sastha temples and hereditary families in Thrissur, Palakkad, and Malappuram.

SACRED RITUAL IN THE AGE OF SPECTACLE

Tourism, photography, social media and cultural festivals have carried these traditions far beyond their shrines. Visibility can create income, document these traditions, and encourage younger practitioners. It can also flatten sacred complexity into spectacular images of fire, towering crowns and painted faces.

These adaptations can provide livelihoods and recognition, but ritual observance, teaching demonstration and staged performance should be recognised as different. Travellers and photographers must also remember that those closest to the deity may not be spectators. They are worshippers seeking blessings, fulfilling vows or speaking privately with their god. The rituals must be respected for what they actually are and not as performances meant for tourists.



Kandamangalam Temple. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons



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OFFERING

PETALS OF DEVOTION

Fragrance and faith meet as India's sacred flowers move through worship, weddings and everyday devotion

TT BUREAU



Across India, flowers shape the visual and sensory language of worship. They crown deities, mark thresholds, perfume ceremonial spaces and move between temples, homes, weddings and festivals with remarkable ease. Their role is decorative, but never only decorative.

The Bhagavad Gita offers the simplest explanation. Krishna says that a leaf, flower, fruit or water, presented with devotion, is accepted. The value of the offering lies not in cost or rarity, but in bhakti, the sincerity behind the gesture.

This is what allows a flower to become a living prayer. Its colour creates meaning, its fragrance alters the atmosphere, and its short life turns beauty into an act of surrender. Some ritual traditions even speak of compassion, self-control, tranquillity, meditation and truth as “inner flowers”, reminding the worshipper that the blossom placed before the divine is only the beginning.

Marigold, jasmine, lotus and rajnigandha each carry a different story, shaped by scripture, poetry, migration, regional practice and generations of human hands.

MARIGOLD: THE COLOUR OF WELCOME

Few flowers appear more inseparable from Indian celebration than the marigold. Its orange and yellow garlands spill across temple entrances, wedding mandaps, festival pavilions and domestic doors. The rounded blooms resemble concentrated sunlight, while their fiery palette recalls lamps and ritual flame.

Yet the marigold’s Indian story is also one of cultural adoption. *Tagetes erecta* is native to Mexico and Central America and was introduced to India via the transoceanic trade by Spanish and Portuguese traders in the 16th century. It cannot, therefore, be described as an ancient Vedic flower. Its sacred status grew later, supported by practical qualities as much as symbolism. Marigolds are vivid, durable, easy to string, and available in the quantities needed for large ceremonies.

A toran does more than decorate a door. It marks the passage between ordinary space and space prepared for blessing, hospitality or celebration. Popular belief may invest marigold garlands with protective force. The safer historical reading is that they create an auspicious boundary, welcoming deity and guest alike.

Claims that the Gita associates the marigold with renunciation have little textual support. Still, hundreds of blossoms disappearing into one garland offer a compelling modern metaphor: individual beauty joining a larger devotional form. Marigold speaks most accurately of radiant welcome, collective celebration and beauty willingly offered.

JASMINE: THE FRAGRANCE OF DEVOTED LOVE

Jasmine carries a more ancient literary and ritual history. Classical texts praise jasmine and related fragrant flowers in worship, while southern Indian traditions have woven the blossom into poetry, adornment and everyday life. Small, white and easily bruised, jasmine possesses an influence far greater than its size.



Jagannath Temple, Puri, India. Image Courtesy: Arpan Ganguly, Pexels

In classical Tamil poetics, mullai, a landscape associated with jasmine, evokes a woman’s patient waiting for her beloved’s return. The flower, therefore, suggests fidelity, constancy and emotional endurance. Its strength lies in tenderness that does not falter.

Jasmine also moves between shringara, the realm of beauty and love, and bhakti, the language of devotion. It adorns bridal hair and divine images, as well as bedrooms and temple sanctums. The same perfume may signal romantic intimacy in one setting and spiritual longing in another. Love becomes a route towards reverence; fragrance becomes an offering.

The jasmine strand worn in a woman’s hair can signal celebration, beauty, regional identity, marital auspiciousness or preparation for worship. Its richness lies in its movement between the private, the public, and the sacred.

LOTUS: UNSTAINED IN THE WORLD

The lotus possesses the strongest philosophical foundation of the four. In the Bhagavad Gita, the person who acts without attachment is compared with a lotus leaf untouched by water.



Asian Temple with Ornate Roof and Lotus Pond. Image Courtesy: Da Na, Pexels



Sacred Offerings by The River. Image Courtesy: Surya Anand, Pexels

The leaf remains in contact with water without clinging to it. Detachment becomes the art of participating fully while remaining inwardly free.

The familiar lotus emerging through muddy water extends this lesson. Purity is sustained within disorder, making the flower an enduring emblem of spiritual composure and awakening.

Its divine associations are equally deep. Lakshmi stands or sits upon a lotus, linking the flower with prosperity, fertility, beauty and auspicious abundance. In the cosmic imagery of Vishnu, a lotus rises from the reclining deity and carries Brahma, who begins creation. Across sculpture, painting and temple architecture, lotus petals form thrones, ceilings, mandalas and sacred centres.

Widely recognised as India's national flower, the lotus belongs as much to the country's artistic and philosophical imagination as to its ponds. It represents the possibility of remaining lucid amid complexity.

RAJNIGANDHA: THE MYSTERY OF NIGHT

Rajnigandha, or tuberose, is another flower whose Indian identity was created through adoption. Native to Mexico, it entered Indian horticulture centuries after the early scriptural

period via trade by Spanish and Portuguese traders around the same time as the Marigold. Its sacred presence is therefore not Vedic, but atmospheric and lived.

Tall stems open into waxy white flowers whose fragrance strengthens after dusk. In wedding spaces, puja rooms, attars and hair ornaments, Rajnigandha creates an invisible architecture. Its scent makes a room feel intimate, still and mysterious.

Some modern traditions include tuberose among white flowers offered to deities, yet claims that it is universally favoured by Lakshmi lack strong classical support. One small study suggested that inhaled tuberose oil may reduce situational test anxiety, but this does not prove a broad therapeutic effect. Its real power in Indian ceremony lies in the mood: it slows attention and gives the night a fragrance.

THE HANDS BEHIND THE PRAYER

No flower reaches an altar alone. It carries the work of growers, harvesters, transporters, wholesalers, stringers and vendors. Women are especially visible in the painstaking labour of sorting buds, tying garlands and selling small bundles near temples and markets. The finished strand may look effortless, yet it contains speed, precision and inherited knowledge.

Calling all flower work devotional service risks romanticising insecure incomes and physical strain. It is better understood as ritual infrastructure: human labour that makes sacred beauty possible. A compelling example comes from Kerala, where Muslim families have cultivated lotuses supplied to Hindu temples. The flower crosses a religious boundary through practical interdependence.

Flowers do not automatically dissolve caste, gender or economic hierarchy. At times, the blossom may enter spaces that remain inaccessible to the worker who grew it. That tension belongs within the story of sacred beauty. By the time a flower rests before the divine, it has travelled through soil, water, commerce, memory and touch.

Marigold, jasmine, lotus, and rajnigandha; their meanings are not equal in age or authority. Some rise from scripture, others from poetry, migration, regional practice and the emotional power of scent. Combined, they reveal a tradition continually cultivated.

A flower is enough, the Gita suggests, when devotion is present. That may be the deepest luxury of all: beauty offered without ownership, fragrance released without possession, and a living thing transformed, for one brief moment, into prayer.



Man Creating Flower Garlands. Image Courtesy: Tanmoy Pal, Pexels



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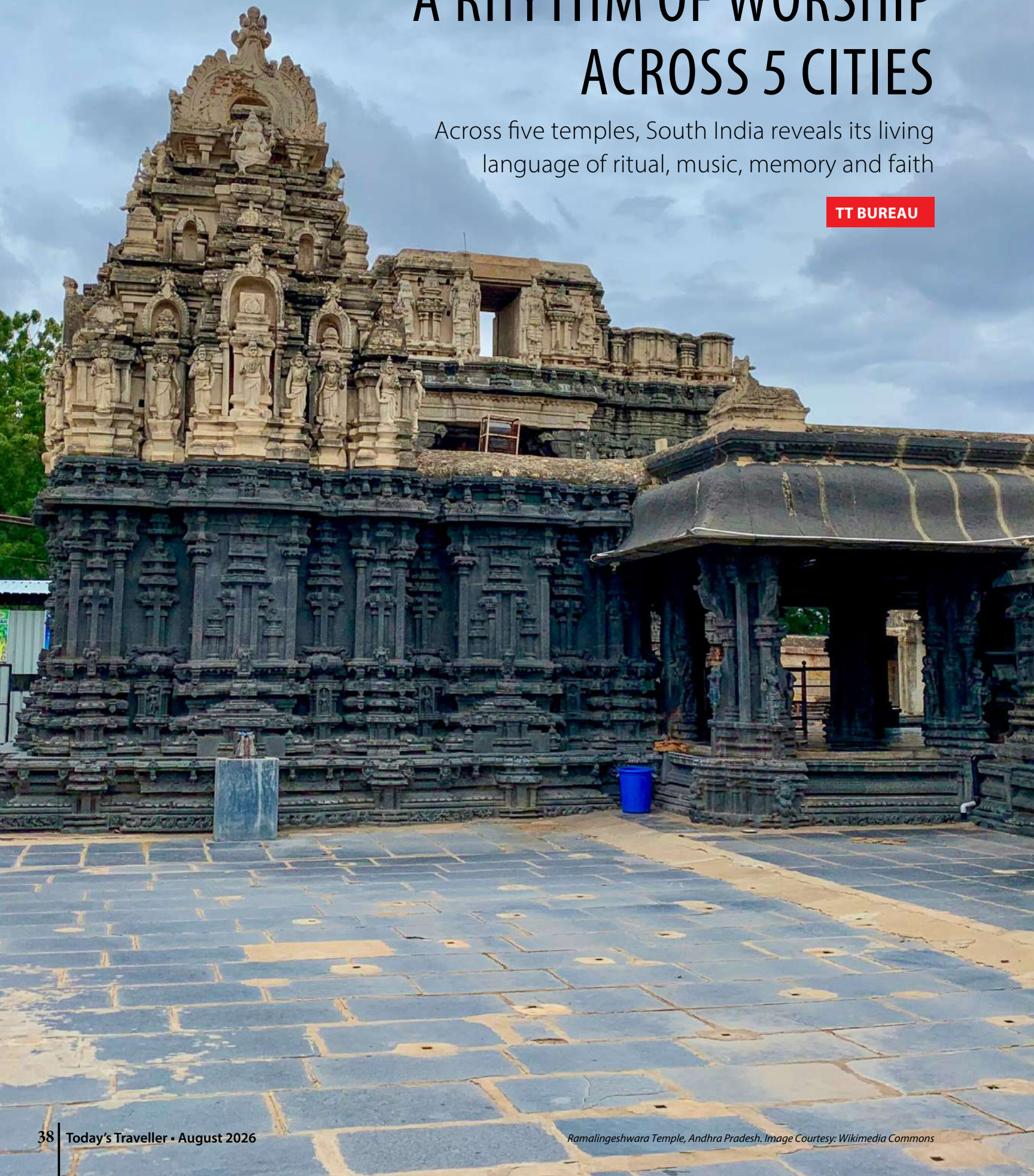
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TEMPLES OF SOUTH INDIA: A RHYTHM OF WORSHIP ACROSS 5 CITIES

Across five temples, South India reveals its living
language of ritual, music, memory and faith

TT BUREAU



Before sunrise, the South has already begun to pray. Bells move through the blue hour as camphor smoke gathers above oil lamps. Jasmine scents the cool air. Garlands arrive fresh, chants begin softly, and temple doors open onto rituals repeated across generations.

The journey crosses five states, each with its own language and way of approaching the divine. In the holy city of Guruvayur, devotion gathers around Lord Guruvayurappan before daylight. The holy hill city of Tirumala rises to the repeated name of Lord Govinda. In the holy city of Hampi, the love of Goddess Pampa and Lord Virupaksha lives beside the Tungabhadra River. The holy city of Warangal finds spiritual energy in prayer and dance, while the holy city of Madurai awakens under the gaze of Goddess Meenakshi.

What connects these places is practice. Devotees know the name they will repeat, the offering they will carry and the darshan towards which they have travelled.

GURUVAYUR: LAMPS BEFORE DAYLIGHT

In the holy city of Guruvayur, the day belongs to Lord Krishna before it belongs to anyone else.

Worship begins in the dark, while the air is still cool and the glow of oil lamps remains brighter than the approaching dawn. Lord Krishna is worshipped here as Lord Guruvayurappan, a divine presence held close through daily prayer, vows and repeated visits.

The story of Lord Guruvayurappan begins in the holy city of Dwaraka. Lord Brihaspati, the divine preceptor known as Guru, and Lord Vayu, the wind god, are believed to have carried the image of Lord Krishna southwards to Kerala. Their names came together to form Guruvayur. The legend gives the deity a journey of his own. Lord Krishna travels, finds a home and becomes inseparable from the spiritual life of the place.

During the 16th century, Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri composed the Narayaneeyam in praise of Lord Guruvayurappan. Its Sanskrit verses celebrate the divine power, beauty and playful nature of Lord Krishna. Poonthanam, the poet and devotee, expressed his faith through Malayalam verses that carried the tenderness of ordinary devotion. One spoke through classical Sanskrit, the other through the language heard in homes and streets. Both made Lord Guruvayurappan feel close to the listener.

Sopana sangeetham, the traditional Kerala style of temple singing, is performed near the steps leading towards the sanctum. The word sopana refers to these steps. Accompanied by the idakka, a small hourglass-shaped drum, the music remains measured and contemplative.

A precise cycle of pujas unfolds before sunrise. During abhishekam, the ceremonial bathing of the deity, Lord Guruvayurappan is bathed, dressed and decorated with flowers and ornaments. Every act prepares the sanctum for darshan.

Then the doors open. Devotees see Lord Guruvayurappan and, in the same moment, receive his divine gaze. The glimpse

is brief, but the meaning has been gathering through the lamps, music, incense and waiting that preceded it.

TIRUMALA: THE HILL OF A MILLION LONGINGS

One name travels constantly through the Seshachalam Hills: Govinda.

It rises along Alipiri Mettu and Srivari Mettu, the two traditional stairways followed by devotees walking towards the holy hill city of Tirumala. Some repeat the name quietly, matching it to their breath. Others call it aloud, allowing the chant to pass through the crowd. With every step, the climb becomes part of the prayer.

Many devotees offer their hair through tonsure before entering the temple. The ritual shaving of the head expresses saranagati, the Sanskrit idea of complete surrender to Lord Venkateswara. Something personal is offered, the ego is placed aside, and the devotee approaches the divine without ornament.

Lord Venkateswara is worshipped as a form of Lord Vishnu present for Kali Yuga, the age in which humanity now lives. This belief gives the relationship its emotional force. Lord Venkateswara is understood as a divine presence who remains spiritually close and attentive to every prayer. The promises carried up the hill are addressed to someone believed to hear them.



Elephant Adorned, Thrissur Festival, Kerala. Image Courtesy: Abhishek Vadakkan, Pexels



Deity in Procession at Tirumala Temple. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

The music of Annamacharya continues to shape that bond. The 15th-century Telugu composer and Hindu saint wrote thousands of songs in praise of Lord Venkateswara. His compositions move through philosophy, humour, romance and surrender, allowing devotion to speak in many emotional registers. They carried the name of Lord Venkateswara beyond the shrine and into homes, concerts and everyday worship.

The contemporary pilgrimage is managed through online bookings, timed entry and organised streams of visitors. Yet beneath this modern order, the older rhythm remains. Lord Govinda's name still travels through the queues.

As darshan approaches, voices gather and attention turns towards one point. Lord Venkateswara appears amid gold, flowers, incense and light. After the climb and the long anticipation, the moment arrives with startling clarity.



Meenakshi Amman Temple, Madurai, India. Image Courtesy: Siddharth Dasari, Flickr

HAMPI: WHERE THE RUINS STILL PRAY

In the holy city of Hampi, devotion begins beside the Tungabhadra River.

Goddess Pampa, revered as a local form of Goddess Parvati, is closely associated with these waters. She is believed to have entered deep penance, holding herself in focused prayer as she sought union with Lord Shiva. In Hampi, Lord Shiva is worshipped as Lord Virupaksha.

The story gives the landscape its spiritual centre. Goddess Pampa does not wait passively for divine grace. She prays with patience and purpose. Her devotion is answered, and her marriage to Lord Virupaksha becomes the defining religious story of the city.

The spiritual memory of Hampi rests in this union. Stones, shrines and riverbanks seem to return repeatedly to Goddess Pampa's prayer. Her name lives in the older identity of the region, while Lord Virupaksha remains its presiding divine presence.

Centuries of change have passed across Hampi, but worship has continued. The spiritual importance of the place lies in this continuity. The temple remains active, lamps are still lit, and devotees continue to approach Lord Virupaksha through rituals that connect the present with an older devotional world.

Each year, the marriage of Lord Virupaksha and Goddess Pampa is celebrated through processions, temple percussion and devotional singing. Their union moves beyond the sanctum and enters the public life of Hampi.

The festival is also a renewal of Goddess Pampa's prayer. Divine love is remembered as something reached through discipline, patience and unwavering faith. Beside the Tungabhadra, the story feels inseparable from the land that first held it.

WARANGAL AND RAMAPPA: WHEN DEVOTION BEGINS TO MOVE

At the Thousand Pillar Temple in the holy city of Warangal, Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu and Lord Surya are worshipped together. Their presence creates several spiritual paths within one place. Lord Shiva draws the mind towards inner stillness. Lord Vishnu carries the assurance of protection. Lord Surya brings the clarity and vitality of light.

Maha Shivaratri, the Great Night of Lord Shiva, gives the holy city of Warangal its deepest rhythm of worship. Devotees fast and remain awake through the night. Bilva leaves are offered to Lord Shiva as chants continue into the early hours. Time is measured through prayer rather than the clock.

At Ramappa, near the holy city of Warangal, Lord Shiva is worshipped as Lord Rudreshwara, a form associated with divine power. The name carries the presence of Lord Shiva beyond the city and into another devotional landscape shaped by ritual and artistic expression.

Perini gives this energy a body. The vigorous Telangana dance is performed in honour of Lord Shiva through grounded footwork, controlled movement and insistent drumbeats. Its spiritual force comes from tandava, the cosmic dance associated with Lord Shiva.

The rhythm appears to rise through the dancer's feet. Movement becomes concentration, and energy becomes prayer. In Perini, devotion is felt as a physical force. Every step lands like an offering.

MADURAI: A GODDESS HOLDS THE CITY

The holy city of Madurai does not merely worship Goddess Meenakshi. It moves according to her presence.

She is queen, warrior and divine ruler. Her legend begins with her birth after a royal ritual seeking a child. Goddess Meenakshi appeared with three breasts and a prophecy that the third would disappear when she met her divine consort.

She grew into a warrior and became queen, commanding her own realm before she encountered Lord Shiva. When they met, the prophecy was fulfilled. Lord Shiva came to the holy city of Madurai as Lord Sundareswarar, the Lord of Beauty, and became her consort.

The spiritual power of the story lies in the place Goddess Meenakshi continues to hold. Lord Sundareswarar enters her world, while her sovereignty remains complete. Their marriage expresses divine companionship without reducing her power or identity.

During the Chithirai festival, the story takes over the city. Goddess Meenakshi is crowned, her victories are honoured, and her marriage to Lord Sundareswarar is celebrated through elaborate ceremonies. The sequence places her authority at the centre. Processions carry her blessings through Madurai, bringing devotees into the divine story.



Mural on the Wall of Meenakshi Amman Temple. Image Courtesy: Vinoth Babu, Flickr

The relationship is renewed each night through the Palliarai ceremony. Palliarai means bedchamber. During the ritual, Lord Sundareswarar is taken in procession to the chamber of Goddess Meenakshi. What appears in the annual festival as a grand divine wedding returns each evening as a quieter expression of companionship.

The nadaswaram, a long double-reed wind instrument, and the thavil, a barrel-shaped drum, give the ceremony its unmistakable Tamil sound. Their music moves ahead of the procession, filling the temple with dignity and energy.

In the holy city of Madurai, worship carries the confidence of its reigning Goddess. The ceremonies return to her, the music announces her, and the city remains unmistakably hers.



Gopuram of Dwaraka Tirumala Temple. Image Courtesy: Wikimedia commons

HYMNS

SONGS FOR THE SOUL

Prayer gathers meaning through voices, bells, ragas, drums and shared silence

TT BUREAU



Before sunrise, sacred places have a sound. Gurbani kirtan travels over the sarovar at Sri Harmandir Sahib (The Golden Temple), the adhan enters a waking neighbourhood, and church bells mark the hour. Nadaswaram and tavil stir a South Indian temple. Ladakhi monasteries answer with chants and low horns; chenda announces Theyyam in North Malabar.

These sounds carry scripture and ritual, but act on listeners. A hymn steadies anxiety, repeated verse deepens devotion, and a drumbeat carries defiance rooted in memory. Voice and rhythm give faith emotional force.

SOUND AND SACRED TIME

Before mechanical clocks, sound structured the day. Church bells announced canonical hours; the adhan, five daily prayers; conches, stages of Hindu worship; and bells and horns summoned Buddhist communities. Rhythms also identified weddings, funerals and festivals, reassuring even those beyond the sanctuary with an audible order.

GURBANI KIRTAN IN RAGA

At Sri Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar, Gurbani kirtan continues most of the day, travelling across the sarovar and marble parikrama. Devotees hear the same shabad during prayer, walks and seva.

The Adi Granth was installed at Harmandir Sahib in 1604. In its final form as Guru Granth Sahib, Sikhs revere it as the living Guru. Its 5,894 hymns are arranged mainly under 31 ragas, then by poetic form and authorship, with metre adding another layer. Musical organisation sits within the scripture itself.

Ragi ensembles now commonly use harmonium and tabla; older Sikh practice includes rabab and taus. Amplification gathers dispersed listeners, while familiar verses bring humility, belonging and quiet emotional release.

TEMPLE MUSIC AND PROCESSION

In South Indian Hindu temples, the powerful double-reed nadaswaram and barrel-shaped tavil fill halls, courtyards and processional streets during worship, festivals and weddings.

Different versions of the mallari accompany sacred water and offerings or guide a deity's ceremonial movement, giving priests and musicians a shared sequence.

Music reaches residents before the image. Its first notes build anticipation; visibility brings recognition. Festival volume exhilarates, while steady rhythm holds the gathering together.

BUDDHIST CHANT IN LADAKH

At Ladakh's monasteries, monks chant with handbells, cymbals and double-sided drums. Dungchen, deep-register telescopic horns, send low tones over courtyards. Each instrument has a liturgical place.

During cham, masked dances presented at festivals such as Hemis Tsechu, drums and horns regulate movement and support Buddhist narratives. Repeated chant preserves texts and pronunciation across generations.

An unfamiliar listener may hear a wall of sound before repetition settles the breath and deep horns make private concerns briefly smaller.

QUR'ANIC RECITATION AND THE ADHAN

In Islamic culture, Qur'anic recitation, the adhan, nasheeds and devotional poetry shape remembrance and reflection. Many Muslims feel recitation in the heart before understanding every word.

The Qur'an lives in written and spoken form. Recitation shapes prayer and memorisation carries its sound across generations. Careful articulation conveys divine guidance; a familiar surah may comfort grief and uncertainty.



Nadaswara Musical Recital at Raja Gopuram, Arunachaleswarar Temple, Tiruvannamalai. Image Courtesy: Arunachalagrace



Gurbani Inside The Hari Mandir Sahib (Darbar Sahib) - Golden Temple. Image Courtesy: Fulvio Spada, Wikimedia Commons

Tajwid governs Arabic articulation, vowel length, nasalisation and pauses, safeguarding pronunciation and textual integrity, while melodic phrasing gives each reciter a distinctive style.

The adhan brings the unaccompanied voice into public space. Recited by the muezzin before five daily prayers, it announces prayer and central beliefs. Regional styles vary. Nasheeds extend the culture, a cappella or with percussion and selected instruments.

CHURCH MUSIC AND ACOUSTIC SPACE

Christian sacred music developed with liturgy and architecture. Medieval Gregorian chant is monophonic: one unaccompanied melodic line. Renaissance polyphony introduced independent voices, while stone walls prolonged notes and made private feeling communal.

During the 1630s, Gregorio Allegri composed *Miserere*, a Psalm 51 setting for Holy Week *Tenebrae* in the Sistine Chapel. Chant and separate vocal groups unite, deepening its themes of mercy and repentance. The famous high C came through later editorial and performance traditions; Allegri's original score lacked it. Twentieth-century recordings made that version famous.

QAWWALI AND DEVOTIONAL LISTENING

Qawwali builds poetry through repetition and rising intensity. Rooted in South Asian Sufism, especially Chishti practice, it forms part of sama, devotional listening. A qawwal party brings lead and supporting singers, handclaps, harmonium, tabla and sometimes dholak.

At Delhi's Nizamuddin Auliya Dargah and Rajasthan's Ajmer Sharif, qawwali remains within shrine culture. Persian, Urdu, Punjabi, Hindi and regional poetry returns in key verses as tempo and improvisation rise.

Listeners respond through attention, gesture or voice. Qawwali can hold longing, surrender, defiance against injustice or release after grief.

THEYYAM, SONG AND PERCUSSION

In North Malabar, Theyyam joins oral history with a performer's sacred transformation. Presented in sacred groves, ancestral shrines and temple courtyards, each rite centres on a named presence. Preparation may include fasting, abstinence and ritual observance.

Where a thottam forms part of the rite, its preliminary song recounts origins and suffering, including injustice and death before deification. Their annual return can make memory public and defiant.

Chenda percussion intensifies as face paint, costume and towering headgear complete the transformation. At the rite's height, the community approaches the performer as the deity's manifest presence. Awe meets reverence, and a blessing may bring relief.

SACRED SOUND AS ESCAPE

Sacred sound offers release amid fragmented digital life. A chant completes its cycle, a procession moves at the musicians' pace, and qawwali builds through repetition. One listener finds relief in a refrain; another hears courage within a drumbeat. Devotion grows through sustained attention.

Sacred sites carry expectations. Head covering matters at a gurdwara, photography restrictions vary, and worshippers retain priority. Respectful distance may give a visitor the clearest experience.

Then comes silence. It rests between verses and follows prayer. After the last sound, grief may lighten and attention return. In a culture crowded by noise, measured quiet can feel unexpectedly complete.

HOMAGE TO EPIC WARRIORS MINUTE REPEATER

– Alexander the Great



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THE NEW SPIRITUAL TRAVELLER

Across India, ancient pilgrim routes are welcoming a new generation seeking faith, stillness and connection, supported by hospitality that is making sacred travel more comfortable, inclusive and deeply experiential.

KAMAL GILL



Before sunrise, a temple town is already awake. Bells sound through narrow lanes. Flower sellers arrange marigolds into bright circles. The first lamps are lit beside the river, while pilgrims move quietly towards shrines that have received visitors for centuries.

The sacred destination remains at the heart of the journey, yet the experience surrounding it is changing. Travellers may arrive for darshan, prayer or pilgrimage, but many now stay for the stories, food, architecture, music, wellness traditions and moments of silence that give a place its deeper rhythm.

A journey to a temple town may include an early morning ritual, a guided heritage walk and a meal prepared according to local customs. A monastery visit may become part of a longer Himalayan retreat shaped by meditation and time in nature. A sacred river may draw one traveller through faith and another through a desire for reflection, history or emotional renewal.

Spiritual tourism is gradually becoming less about reaching a single shrine and more about understanding the landscape of belief around it.

THE JOURNEY WITHIN THE JOURNEY

India's spiritual geography is vast and layered. Sacred rivers move through ancient cities. Mountain paths lead towards shrines surrounded by snow and silence. Temple towns carry the memory of dynasties, poets, saints, musicians and generations of pilgrims. Mosques, monasteries, churches, gurudwaras and sacred groves hold their own traditions of hospitality, ritual and contemplation.

EVERY DESTINATION OFFERS A DIFFERENT EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY.

Varanasi carries the intensity of life and death along the Ganga. Amritsar offers the quiet dignity of collective prayer and service. Bodh Gaya draws visitors into meditation beneath the memory of enlightenment. Rishikesh brings together river rituals, yoga and Himalayan stillness. Puri is shaped by devotion, temple cuisine, and the great Rath Yatra. Rameswaram carries the spiritual pull of the southern coast, where sacred waters, temple rituals and the memory of Lord Rama meet the sea. In the mountains, monasteries and remote shrines ask travellers to slow their pace and surrender to the landscape.

The modern spiritual traveller is increasingly interested in these layers. The shrine remains essential, but so does the context. People want to understand the meaning of a ritual, the history of a neighbourhood, the ingredients in a sacred meal and the hands behind a temple craft.

This curiosity is encouraging slower journeys. Instead of arriving, praying and leaving, travellers are spending more time within sacred destinations. They are walking through old quarters, meeting local artisans, listening to devotional music and experiencing traditions that exist beyond the central place of worship.

The journey becomes richer when the destination is allowed to speak.

THE NEW PILGRIM

The profile of the spiritual traveller is broadening. Young Indians, including Gen Z travellers, are showing an interest in the sacred. Some travel through personal faith. Others seek silence, cultural discovery, mental space or a stronger connection with family history.

Their spiritual language may include meditation, music, wellness, nature and storytelling alongside formal religious practice. For a generation surrounded by speed, digital noise and endless visibility, the appeal of a sacred journey can lie in its ability to create distance. Spiritual travel offers permission to pause.

Yet these journeys are rarely entirely individual. Family continues to shape the way young Indians travel. Parents and grandparents often become part of the itinerary, turning spiritual travel into a multigenerational experience.

FAITH, STILLNESS AND ESCAPE

Spiritual travel also offers a form of escape, though not always the kind associated with leisure. In sacred spaces, travellers may briefly step outside the pressure to achieve, respond and perform.

Repetition replaces novelty.

A chant returns to the same line. A lamp is lit in the same way it has been lit for generations. A river continues its movement, indifferent to schedules.

This rhythm can be deeply restorative.

The traveller does not necessarily need to follow every ritual or understand every symbol. Meaning may arrive through atmosphere: bare feet touching cool stone, the smell of incense,



Ancient Temple Tower in India. Image Courtesy: Ganesh kumar s Hebbar, Pexels



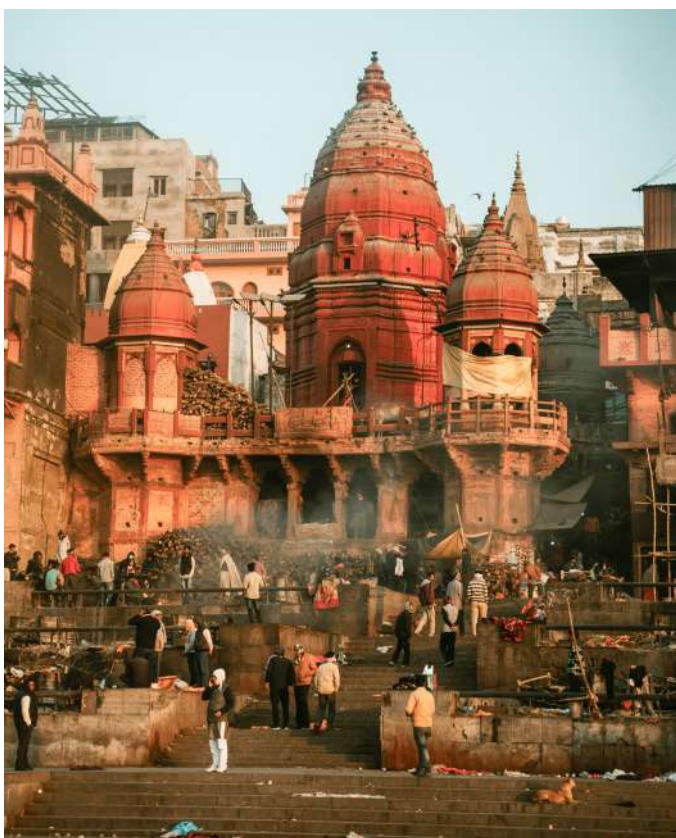
Hindu Sadhus in Traditional Attire Seated at a Shrine. Image Courtesy: Sai Kumar, Pexels

the sound of water, the warmth of a community meal or the sudden quiet inside a crowded shrine.

HOSPITALITY ALONG THE PILGRIM ROUTE

Before dawn reaches the temple towers, the hotel lobby is already awake.

Breakfast boxes are being packed for guests leaving before sunrise. A wheelchair is brought quietly to the entrance. The driver has checked the temple route, the kitchen has prepared a fasting meal, and three generations of one family are gathering near the lifts: grandparents carrying prayer beads, parents carrying medicines and shawls, and younger travellers carrying the itinerary on their phones.



Manikarnika Ghat Temple, Varanasi. Image Courtesy: Stijn Dijkstra, Pexels

This is the new landscape of spiritual travel in India.

Spiritual travel in India is entering a new chapter. HVS ANAROCK's July report, *The Rise of Faith-led Hospitality in India*, points to strong hotel growth across India's pilgrimage destinations. Religious centres now account for nearly 14 per cent of the country's branded hotel pipeline, with around 19,760 rooms expected by 2030. The global religious tourism market is projected to reach \$671.9 billion by the same year.

Ayodhya leads the development pipeline with nearly 2,100 branded rooms, while Amritsar, Tirupati, Varanasi, Rishikesh, Vrindavan, Ujjain, Haridwar, Pushkar and Dwarka are also attracting major hospitality investment.

Hotel groups are no longer treating pilgrimage towns as occasional or seasonal markets. Luxury, premium, midscale and value brands are moving into Ayodhya, Varanasi, Jammu, Amritsar, Vrindavan, Haridwar, Shirdi, Puri, Ujjain, Omkareshwar, Tirupati, Rameswaram, Somnath, Bodh Gaya and Salasar. Some are creating reliable family hotels with vegetarian kitchens, accessible rooms and temple transfers. A few are designing entire brands around spiritual hospitality.

Behind the mood lies serious capital. Ayodhya alone had attracted approximately ₹4,000 crore across 126 hospitality projects reported in early 2024. A later study estimated that the city could require between 8,500 and 12,500 branded rooms by 2031. Varanasi, meanwhile, has 27 hotel projects linked with a combined investment of about ₹1,207 crore, including operational and under-construction properties.

AYODHYA BECOMES HOSPITALITY'S SACRED SHOWCASE

No destination reflects the scale of this shift more clearly than Ayodhya.

IHCL opened the 162-room Ayodhyām, Ayodhya, under its SeleQtions brand in June 2026 and represents the arrival of experience-led luxury within the pilgrimage market. The group is also developing a 300-room Taj spread across 7.2 acres, with 29 luxury villas, three restaurants, a J Wellness Circle spa and more than 34,000 square feet of event space. IHCL has additionally announced Gateway, Vivanta and Ginger projects in Ayodhya, giving it a presence across luxury, upscale and lean luxe segments.

The scale says something important. The pilgrimage town is being read as a destination where devotion, celebration, heritage and leisure may exist within the same journey.

ITC Hotels joined this movement in June 2026 with a management agreement for a 143-room Welcomhotel in Ayodhya. The signing follows Welcomhotel announcements in Bodh Gaya, Shirdi and Vrindavan, suggesting a deliberate network across India's major spiritual circuits rather than a single opportunistic entry.

Lemon Tree Hotels is approaching the city at comparable scale. Lemon Tree Premier, Ayodhya, being developed with RJ Corp, is planned with approximately 300 rooms, along with

banquet and conference facilities. The property will sit around 4.5 kilometres from the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi complex, combining pilgrimage access with the familiar amenities of an upscale city hotel.

A separate ₹220 crore Uttar Pradesh development plan announced by Aurika Group includes 150 premium serviced suites in Ayodhya with wellness facilities and curated spiritual experiences.

At the luxury end, the House of Abhinandan Lodha has announced a 100-room hotel in Ayodhya with an expected investment exceeding ₹450 crore and a target opening in March 2028. The wider partnership with The Leela includes management of an associated club, serviced villa and luxury residential experiences. The luxury hotel serves as the anchor for HoABL's massive 51-acre flagship township, "The Sarayu. In line with the spiritual landscape of Ayodhya, it will function as The Leela's first-ever pure-vegetarian 5-star hotel.

A HOTEL MAP DRAWN AROUND SACRED INDIA

The expansion spreads far beyond Ayodhya.

Radisson Hotel Group has been equally direct about its interest in faith-led travel. Its recent spiritual destination portfolio includes the 87-room Temple Tree Hotel Shirdi, a member of Radisson Individuals, offering pure vegetarian dining and complimentary transfers to the Sai Baba Temple. It has also introduced Park Inn & Suites by Radisson in Puri, Radisson RED in Indore and a 150-room Radisson Hotel in Ujjain. A separate three-hotel agreement covering Deoghar, Puri and Ranchi is expected to add about 400 rooms across eastern India.



Chariot Procession During an Indian Festival. Image Courtesy: Thilina Alagiyawanna, Pexels

GRT Hotels & Resorts has built its pilgrimage presence more closely around the temple towns and sacred circuits of South India. Its dedicated Divine Darshan programme connects properties in Tuticorin, Kanchipuram, Madurai, Tirunelveli and Tiruttani, positioning the hotels as practical bases for temple journeys rather than conventional city stays. The opening of Regency Palani in February 2026 strengthened this strategy further. Located at the foothills of the Palani Hills, the 31-room hotel marked GRT's presence across the six shrines of the Arupadai Veedu circuit dedicated to Lord Murugan.

Lemon Tree Hotels has assembled one of the most extensive pipelines of spiritual destinations. Alongside its Ayodhya project,



Elderly Man Lighting Traditional Oil Lamps. Image Courtesy: Guduru Ajay Bhargav, Pexels

the company has announced hotels in Vrindavan, Shirdi, Somnath, Gaya, Omkareshwar and Chitrakoot. It launched Lemon Tree Premier, Tirupati, in October 2025, later signed a Lemon Tree Suites property in the city, and secured a 28-year licence for an Aurika heritage hotel in Varanasi.

Accor's upcoming spiritual portfolio includes the 200-room Pullman Amritsar, a 350-room Novotel and ibis Styles complex in Tirupati, and the luxury Sofitel Rishikesh Narendra Nagar.

IHG has entered Ayodhya with the 125-room Holiday Inn Express and already operates Holiday Inn and voco properties in Amritsar, along with a Holiday Inn in Katra near Vaishno Devi.

Clarks Varanasi brings a longer-established hospitality presence to the spiritual-travel landscape. The flagship property of the Clarks Group has operated for more than half a century, offering 104 rooms across 3.5 acres of landscaped grounds. The 104-room hotel offers pilgrims a quieter base within convenient reach of the Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple, Dashashwamedh Ghat and Varanasi's sacred riverfront. Its position reflects another important strand of pilgrimage hospitality: established city hotels adapting their services and location advantages to accommodate families, international visitors, group travellers and devotees exploring Varanasi's temples, ghats and rituals.

The sacred city of Puri is seeing a heavy rush from brands like Accor and the Radisson Group.

IHCL's Taj Puri Resort & Spa shows how established hospitality brands are combining pilgrimage with leisure, culture and high-end resort experiences. Opened in December 2024, the 90-room beachfront property marks the arrival of a luxury resort format

within one of India's four Char Dham destinations, allowing guests to combine visits to the Lord Jagannath Temple with the coast, wellness, and longer family stays. IHCL has described Puri as part of an emerging east-coast spiritual circuit connecting Chennai, Tirupati, Bhubaneswar and Puri.

In Rameswaram, Grand Continent Hotels has opened a contemporary four-star, fully vegetarian property with 48 rooms. The company is also developing hotels in Somnath, Varanasi and Ayodhya.

These projects have the widest effect. They bring branded standards across luxury to mid-category accommodation segments.

THE BIGGEST BET YET

The financial scale of the movement became clearer in June 2026, when Omaxe announced a dedicated hospitality vertical with a planned investment of approximately ₹6,200 crore over four to five years. The proposed portfolio includes two hotels each in Ayodhya and Vrindavan, along with properties in Prayagraj, Ujjain and Amritsar, among other urban and transit markets.

This is perhaps the clearest sign that pilgrimage destinations have entered the mainstream development map.

India's pilgrim routes are changing, but their deepest purpose remains intact. They lead towards temples, rivers, monasteries and shrines. They also lead inward, towards memory, family and questions that cannot be answered quickly.

And perhaps that is why, even in an age of faster journeys and greater comfort, the spiritual traveller continues to return.





BIANCHET ULTRAFINO MASERATI

SACRED SILK ROUTES: CARAVANS OF FAITH AND CULTURE

Faiths, merchants and pilgrims transformed the Silk Routes into history's greatest corridor of cultural exchange

CHANDRUTPAL DAS BORO

The Silk Routes shimmer in the popular imagination: camel caravans moving beneath an amber sky, bolts of silk tucked beside spices and legendary cities rising like mirages beyond the desert. Between the 2nd century BCE and the 15th century CE, no single road defined them. An intricate web of tracks, mountain passes and sea lanes linked East Asia, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Persia, Arabia, Africa and the Mediterranean.

The most enduring cargo could not be weighed. Pilgrims brought beliefs. Translators introduced languages. Musicians arrived with unfamiliar melodies, while artists offered colours, symbols and new visions of the divine.

At the centre stood Central Asia, a cultural force in its own right. Samarkand, Bukhara, Balkh, Merv, Kashgar and the oasis kingdoms gathered merchants, monks, diplomats and scholars into markets alive with several languages. Ideas met beside horses and textiles, in monasteries and caravanserais.

INDIA ACROSS LAND AND SEA

India formed a vital southern arc of this connected world: a source of prized goods, a pilgrimage destination and a meeting point for continental and maritime routes. Ancient highways linked the Gangetic plain and cities such as Mathura and

Indraprastha with Taxila and Bactria. Kashmir and the Himalayan passes opened demanding paths into Central Asia and Tibet.

The sea widened the map. Ports on India's western and eastern coasts entered trading circuits that reached the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and China. Arikamedu, active around the 1st century BCE and 1st century CE, has yielded Mediterranean amphorae. Indian cottons, spices, gemstones and ivory journeyed outwards; silk, horses, glassware and precious metals arrived in return.

These commercial connections also carried sacred knowledge. India attracted Buddhist pilgrims seeking sacred sites and authoritative manuscripts. Along the sea lanes, merchants, Brahmins, scholars, artisans and royal alliances introduced Hindu traditions into Southeast Asia during the first millennium CE. Sanskrit became a language of prestige at many courts, carrying literature, cosmology, ritual knowledge and ideas of kingship.

Local rulers interpreted Mount Meru and sacred kingship through architecture shaped by regional landscapes. Prambanan arose in the 9th century Java, while Angkor developed in Cambodia between the 9th and 15th centuries. Their towers, courtyards and narrative reliefs demonstrate the scale and confidence of these new sacred cultures.





The Ramayana and Mahabharata entered poetry, sculpture, theatre, dance and court life. Their heroes gained regional names, costumes and personalities. Across Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and neighbouring lands, the epics became part of living cultural memory.

Hindu imagery also moved overland. A wooden panel dating to the 7th or 8th century and depicting Ganesha was discovered near Khotan, placing the elephant-headed deity deep within Central Asia. Its portability reveals how far sacred imagery could roam.

BUDDHISM TAKES THE LONG ROAD

Buddhism became the most visibly travelled faith of the early routes. Emerging in northern India around the 5th century BCE, it passed through Gandhara and Bactria, then through the oasis kingdoms towards Dunhuang and China. Other branches climbed into Tibet or sailed through Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia. China later carried transformed Buddhist traditions onwards into Korea and Japan.

Monks and merchants sustained the journey. Traders financed stupas, cave temples and monasteries that offered shelter and education. These religious institutions became libraries, schools and translation centres, supporting spiritual enquiry alongside the practical needs of travel.

Gandhara gave Buddhism a recognisable visual language. Under the Kushans, during the 1st - 3rd centuries CE, Indian, Iranian, Central Asian and classical Mediterranean influences met. Buddhas appeared in deeply folded robes, with modelled faces and wavy hair. Related styles surfaced across Bamiyan and the desert oases, gathering new colours and details along the way.

Faxian travelled between 399 and 414 in search of Buddhist texts. Xuanzang crossed Central Asia between 629 and 645, studied with renowned teachers and returned to Chang'an

carrying manuscripts, statues and relics. Yijing chose the maritime route between 671 and 695, spending time in Srivijaya while pursuing Buddhist learning.

Words made journeys of their own. Kumarajiva, who lived between 344 and 413 and was raised in Kucha, led an influential translation bureau in Chang'an. Sanskrit and Central Asian texts entered Chinese through an intricate intellectual process. New vocabulary had to be created for karma, emptiness, compassion and meditation. Meaning evolved alongside language.

SACRED CROSSROADS OF THE DESERT

The desert oases were the network's great cultural salons. Khotan combined an Iranian language with Buddhist belief, Indian scripts and growing Chinese influence. Kucha became known for monasteries, translators, musicians and the painted caves of Kizil. Turfan supported Buddhist, Christian and Manichaean communities.



*Restoration of Persian Miniature art by Davlat Toshev in Bukhara, Uzbekistan.
Image Courtesy: Andrey Arakelyan*



Angkor Wat Temple, Cambodia. Image Courtesy: Serg Alesenko, Pexels

Dunhuang remains the great visual archive. Begun in 366 near the Gobi Desert, the Mogao Caves contain centuries of murals and sculptures. Celestial musicians float across painted ceilings; caravans, patrons and pilgrims gather below. The caves turn theology into theatre without losing their stillness.

In 1900, the sealed chamber known as Cave 17 or the Library Cave was opened, revealing tens of thousands of manuscripts and artworks. Texts appeared in Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, Sogdian, Khotanese and other languages. Buddhist works dominated, yet the collection preserved Daoist, Christian, Manichaean and secular material. The celebrated Diamond Sutra, dated 868, is the earliest known complete printed book carrying an explicit date.

Caravanserais made daily encounters possible. They offered water, food, storage and security. Inside their courtyards, accents mixed, news circulated, and strangers compared customs without ceremony. Nearby markets placed incense, manuscripts and devotional textiles beside saddles, ceramics and fruit.



Lamayuru Monastery, Ladakh. Image Courtesy: Roman Saenko, Pexels

MANY FAITHS, ONE NETWORK

The Sogdians, Iranian-speaking merchants prominent during the 5th - 8th centuries, were among the great connectors. Their communities stretched across Central Asia into China, taking Zoroastrian customs with them. Sogdian tombs in China combine local funerary forms with Iranian visions of fire, feasting and the soul's passage.

Manichaeism proved equally mobile. Founded in 3rd century Persia, it drew upon Christian, Zoroastrian and Buddhist ideas. It gained Uyghur patronage in 762 and entered China as the Religion of Light.

Christianity journeyed east through the Church of the East, establishing communities across Persia, Merv, Sogdiana and Tang China. The Xi'an Stele, erected in 781, describes Christian life through language influenced by Buddhist and Daoist thought. Crosses sometimes rose above lotus forms, producing a sacred vocabulary with several cultural accents.

Islam reshaped the network after the 7th century. Bukhara, Samarkand, Merv, Kashgar and Baghdad became centres of theology, astronomy, medicine, mathematics, poetry and manuscript culture. Arab and Persian merchants also established communities across East Africa, India, Southeast Asia and southern China. Mosques, madrasas and Sufi shrines joined the spiritual geography of commerce.

Jewish merchants and communities participated in this mobile world as well. Kaifeng's Jewish community adopted Chinese language, names and architectural forms while maintaining its religious identity.

Coexistence was never guaranteed. Patronage could turn into persecution, as during the Tang suppression of several religions between 842 and 846. Encounters produced curiosity and collaboration, yet they could also generate competition, conversion and conflict.

WHEN THE SACRED CHANGED SHAPE

Faiths survived long journeys by finding local expression. Avalokiteshvara, generally male in Indian and Tibetan traditions, gradually became Guanyin, frequently represented as female in China, before appearing as Kannon in Japan. The Indian stupa inspired the Tibetan chorten and the East Asian pagoda. The Sanskrit dhyana became Chan in China, Seon in Korea and Zen in Japan, each developing its own spiritual character.

Art followed the same pattern. Iranian robes wrapped Buddhist figures. Chinese clouds surrounded foreign deities. Christian crosses met lotus petals. Cave painters borrowed jewellery, textiles, and faces from cosmopolitan markets. Such works preserved the memory of an encounter while becoming fully at home in a new culture.

THE CULTURE THAT TRAVELLED

Religion formed part of a larger cultural current. Central Asian musicians, dancers and instruments became fashionable in Tang China between 618 and 907. The pipa developed through contact with Western and Central Asian lute traditions, while the energetic Sogdian whirling dance delighted elite audiences.

Clothing moved as quickly as music. Tang men and women adopted riding boots, fitted sleeves and foreign hats. Persian motifs appeared on Chinese textiles, Chinese silk became Buddhist banners and Christian hangings, and luxurious brocades entered Himalayan ritual dress.

Sacred cargo could be exquisitely portable: bronze icons, painted silk banners, prayer beads, incense, reliquaries and miniature stupas. Such objects gathered new stories in temples, homes and tombs. Food carried culture as well, with grapes, pomegranates, walnuts, spices, tea, and culinary techniques circulating across the connected world.



Gobi Desert. Image Courtesy: srtrips

A LEGACY STILL IN MOTION

The Silk Routes remain visible in places that reward slow travel. Xi'an holds the memory of a cosmopolitan capital. Dunhuang offers painted silence and desert light. Samarkand dazzles with blue domes; Bukhara invites lingering in shaded courtyards and merchant houses. Ladakh preserves monasteries, bazaars, and caravan memories amid the high passes, while Istanbul brings together the eastern and western worlds along the Bosphorus.

Today's refined journey may include private cave visits, expert-led walks, historic courtyard stays, craft ateliers and long dinners beneath carved timber ceilings. The deepest luxury lies in connection: recognising a familiar symbol in an unexpected place, hearing an old melody in a new language, or standing inside a monument built by several worlds at once.

The Silk Routes endure as a shared archive written across landscapes. Every cave, shrine, manuscript and melody reveals a world enriched by movement and encounter.



Registan Square, Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Image Courtesy: Hans-Jürgen Weinhardt, Unsplash



Golden Temple. Image Courtesy: Louis Montrose Photography

BLESSED BITES: HOW FOOD CARRIES FAITH

Sacred food connects kitchens with cosmos, turning myth, history and gratitude into unforgettable edible memory

TT BUREAU

Sacred food begins with a pause. Before the bite, there is a blessing. Before the feast, there is a fast. Before the sweet is shared, it is offered. A loaf of bread, a date at sunset, a bowl of rice, a spoon of honey, a laddu in the palm, a cup of tea in a monastery, a fish cooked after ceremony, each carries more than flavour when a community gives it meaning.

Across cultures, food has helped humans speak to what they cannot see. It has marked covenant, sacrifice, harvest, mourning, gratitude, purity, hospitality and belonging. The ingredient may be simple, but ritual changes its role. Bread

can become Communion. Matzah can become the memory of exile and liberation. Dates can become the gentle first taste after Ramadan fasting. Karah Prasad can become equality served warm in every hand. Prasad can become grace returned after offering.

BEFORE THE FIRST BITE

Sacred food is older than temples, churches and formal dining tables. It begins with the first human astonishment that the earth can feed us at all. Grain rises from soil. Milk comes from animals. Fruit follows seasons. Fish return to rivers. Fire makes food edible.

Rain decides abundance. No wonder early communities offered food back to the forces that made survival possible.

In ancient ritual cultures, grain, oil, wine, milk, honey, fish, meat, salt and bread were given to gods, spirits, ancestors or the dead. Vedic rites placed ghee and grains into sacred fire. Greek and Roman households poured libations. Harvest communities saved the first crop. Indigenous traditions often treated the first catch, corn, wild rice, salmon, buffalo or berries as part of a relationship with land, not merely a resource.

MYTH ON THE PLATE

A sacred food lasts when a story enters it. Krishna's butter carries the playfulness of Braj, the cowherd world, stolen makhan and divine intimacy. Ganesha's modak turns sweetness into a symbol of wisdom. In Christianity, bread and wine recall the Last Supper and the mystery of communion. In Judaism, the Passover Seder uses matzah, bitter herbs, salt water and wine so that history is not only narrated, but tasted.

Islam gives the date a special tenderness at iftar, associated with the Prophet's practice of breaking the fast gently. Buddhist offerings of rice, tea, fruit or simple vegetarian dishes speak of merit, generosity and mindfulness.

Buddhist settings have rice, fruit, tea or simple vegetarian offerings speak of mindfulness, generosity and merit. In Indigenous foodways, corn, wild rice, fish or cacao may hold creation stories, ecological responsibility and ancestral presence.

Such foods endure because they are not recipes alone. They are portable stories. A child may first learn a faith not through doctrine, but through the taste of festival bread, the smell of ghee, the bitterness of herbs, the sweetness of prasad or the silence before a monastic meal.

A WORLD OF EDIBLE SYMBOLS

Look closely, and sacred food has a recurring grammar. Bread appears everywhere because it is labour made visible: grain, grinding, hands, heat, sharing. Rice carries fertility, continuity and the hope that the household will not go empty. Milk suggests nurture and purity. Honey and jaggery bring sweetness to the mood of ritual. Salt preserves, protects and binds. Oil anoints and heals. Dates mark patience and renewal.

Then there are sweets, the diplomats of devotion. Laddus, modaks, halwa, honey cakes, rice puddings, festive breads, sweet porridges and jaggery-filled dumplings make celebration edible. Panchamrit gathers milk, curd, honey, ghee and sugar into a small ritual universe. Karah Prasad, made with wheat flour, ghee and sugar, carries the Sikh ideal that grace should be received equally.

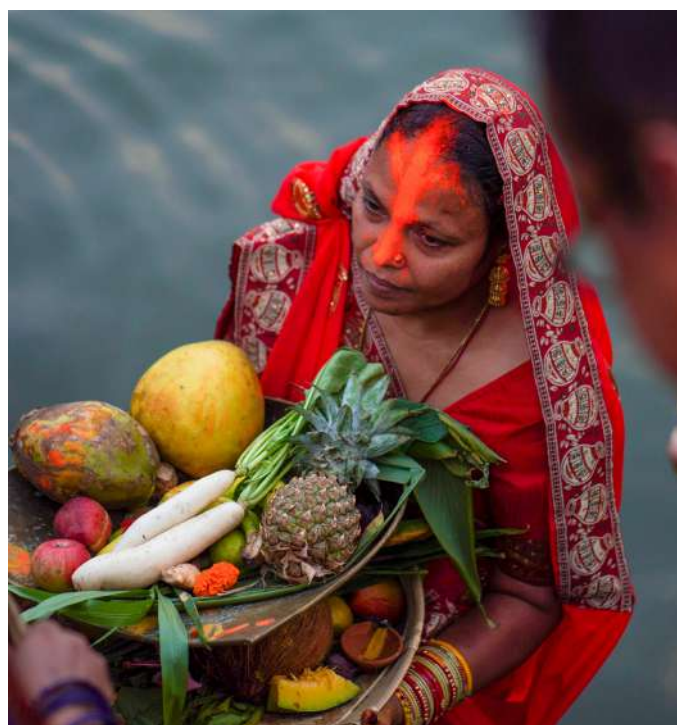
The sacred is rarely hidden in rare ingredients. More often, it is found in foods that return again and again until the tongue knows the calendar.



Iftar Meal, Jama Masjid, Old Delhi. Image Courtesy: Aryasuraj, Pexels

THE WISDOM BENEATH BELIEF

Many sacred food practices are also practical. Fasting creates cycles of restraint. Communal meals make nourishment visible and shared. Rice, lentils, bread, soup, dates, curd, grains and porridges are easy to digest, easy to scale and able to feed many. Dates give quick energy after fasting. Lentils and beans add protein. Milk, curd and ghee bring fat, calcium and satiety. Fermented foods can support digestion.



Chhath Puja Prasad. Image Courtesy: Rohan Dewangan, Pexels



Freshly Made Modak During Ganesh Chaturthi. Image Courtesy: Prchi Palwe, Unsplash

Seasonal ritual foods keep communities close to land. Cooling foods appear in heat, richer dishes in winter, harvest foods at abundance and lighter foods during discipline. This does not reduce faith to nutrition. It shows how belief often preserved older forms of food wisdom, moderation, rhythm, seasonality and gratitude.

PORTABLE HERITAGE

Sacred food travels especially well. Migrants may leave behind a village, shrine, river, neighbourhood or ancestral kitchen, yet carry the taste of holy days with them. Sabbath bread, iftar dates,

festival sweets, prasad packets, langar memories, Christmas loaves, ancestral rice and New Year dumplings become small edible homelands.

A dish cooked in a distant city can restore continuity. It tells the next generation where the family came from, even when the original landscape survives only in stories, songs and family phrases. Sacred food becomes heritage that can be packed, cooked, served and remembered. In diaspora homes, the recipe often becomes a map, pointing back to language, elders, festivals and landscapes no longer seen every day.

GRANNY'S KITCHEN, EVERYWHERE

Every culture has a grandmother who made food feel slightly dangerous to disrespect. Do not waste bread. Pick up fallen rice. Never insult salt. Do not cook in anger. Do not touch pickle with wet hands. Do not begin before thanks. Keep festival food separate. Feed the guest properly. Save the first portion. Cook this dish only on this day.

Some rules were hygiene. Some were superstition. Some were ecology before the word became fashionable. A dry spoon saved pickle from spoilage. A watched pot protected precious milk. A first roti for a cow, a bowl for birds, a portion for ancestors or a plate for guests stretched the meal beyond the self.

That is the genius of sacred food. It makes belief intimate. It does not remain in scripture, sermon or philosophy. It enters the hand, the kitchen, the tongue, the calendar, the child. It teaches that food is never only what fills us. It ties us to the dead, the divine, the land, the household and one another.



Devotees Being Offered Prasada.. Image Courtesy: Kalki Online



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