

Jain Temple Visit

Towards the end of the last century, I remember seeing a grassy field with birds fluttering in the occasional tree. The terrain sloped gently away towards other fields and woodland in the middle distance. It was indeed a peaceful rural idyll with a blue sky and summer cumulus clouds, and found just north of London by Potters Bar.

Just recently last year in mid-November, I revisited the site and beheld a quite miraculous transformation. The field had been levelled and landscaped, and, centrally placed was a quite magnificent Jain temple – Shikharbandi Jain Deraser. In the surrounding gardens there was a fountain by each corner of the temple. Furthermore there were twenty four shrines – Devkuklias – representing the twenty four Tirthankas (the original Jain teachers around 2,500 years ago). Each of the similar statues was identified by a special symbol, which was often rural Indian wildlife. These shrines were spaced out along the arms of a massive paved Swastika – Sathia (the sacred symbol of Jain Dharma).

The Temple itself was at the centre of the Sathia and it is a wonderful architectural jewel of superb Indian craftsmanship. Pink sandstone as well as white marble quarried and carved on the Indian sub-continent were shipped over to Europe and assembled (almost like a giant three dimensional jigsaw puzzle without any steel) in this beautiful setting in the Hertfordshire countryside.

Inside the Temple, one's attention is immediately drawn to the Garbhagruha, the sacred throne-room of the Deraser, where images of Mahavir, Parshvanatha and Rushabhader (three of the twenty four Tirthankas) are enshrined. One could walk around the Garbhagruha, ring a suspended bell to offer a prayer, give a donation and look at pictures of two sacred Jain temple sites in India (Mt Abu in Gujerat and one just outside Calcutta on the other side of the country). There were just

a few other, small images and then, when one raised one's eyes heavenward, there was an amazing, intricate circular marble ceiling – almost like a gigantic and magnificent flower with countless carved petals.

Sister Elizabeth O'Donohoe organised this mini pilgrimage visit on a Sunday afternoon in Inter Faith Week for around twenty participants. We were all greatly impressed with the breath-taking beauty of the Deraser and its surroundings. We were also profoundly grateful to the priest, who introduced himself simply as 'Vijay', for a detailed explanation and commentary on the history of Jainism and its teachings – Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct – and the development of this particular centre of devotion. Indeed it is the only such Shikharbandi Jain Deraser in Europe. Although momentarily, we were told that, walking in the specially designed gardens—uniquely planned according to Jain principles—and on entering the Temple, we were in fact in India and not in Europe! What a delight!

Space will not allow a description and commentary on many other landmarks; arches, monuments statues, flag and tower. There was also a huge sculptured palm of a hand (the size of a small swimming pool) with the Jain wheel symbol (chakra) inset into the palm together with a text signifying 'do not be afraid'.

The original house, which I remember once had a room set aside for Temple Devotions, and the large reception centre were still there but both well away from the Deraser. Finally we were generously entertained in the house after our visit with a very English cup of tea and biscuits. Many thanks to the Jain authorities for such a memorable visit, and much appreciation to Sister Elizabeth for coordinating the arrangements and enabling us to explore this sacred site.

Francis N. Prest

'Sharing of Faiths' (Dacorum)

The following events will all be held at:

Nash Mills C of E School Belswains Lane,
Hemel Hempstead HP3 9XB

Wednesday, 24 February, 7.30pm

'What it means to me to be a Sikh': Jessie Rayat.

Tuesday, 23 March, 7.30pm

'What it means to be a Muslim family': Marziyah and Murtaza Panju.

Wednesday, 21 April, 7.30pm

'The work of an Imam' to be confirmed.

Planned events include visits to a synagogue, Buddhist and Hindu speakers and insights into contemporary Christian religious communities.

Chair: Revd David Lawson

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Secretary: Revd John Quill

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