



A Joyous Celebration

By Adaora Nkwonta | March 27, 2012

At home religion is seen as a separate part of your life, while in India religion is so intertwined within life that it's hard to differentiate between life and religion. In church you are expected to sit there quietly and attentive while the priest delivers their sermon from a stand that looks down on the congregation. That could not be further from the truth here. In India, religion is filled with so much color, music, and celebration. It's part of your style, your friends, even your social standing in the community. One Hindu celebration that I had the opportunity to be a part of was in Rishikesh called the Ganga Aarti Ceremony, that's performed everyday along the bank of the Ganga River.



Aarti is a Hindu religious ritual of worship, a part of puja, in which light from wicks soaked in ghee (purified butter) are offered to one or more deities (gods). It involves circulating an 'aarti plate' or 'aarti lamp' around a person or deity and is accompanied by singing of songs in praise of that deva or person. In practice it is believed that the plate or lamp is supposed to acquire the power of the deity.

Being able to experience the Ganga Aarti is something that I will never forget. There were so many people and so much energy surrounding the event that it literally felt like a once a year type of celebration like the 4th of July for example. But no, for the people in Rishikesh it was just another regular day of week. For the entire week that I was in Rishikesh the same energy was present at every ceremony. One of the nights, I and the two other girls I was traveling with, arrived early to the ceremony, as such celebrations are generally pretty crowded so we wanted to get good seats.



As we waited for the ceremony to begin we were approached by one of the priest who invited us to take part of a blessing ritual before aarti began. During the ritual the priest placed flowers into our hands and poured water over them from a gold goblet while chanting. He then repeated another chant while placing a bind (a marking on the forehead) on each of our heads. Although I didn't understand most of what the priest was saying the experience itself was very exciting and humbling because it's not something I get to be a part of everyday.

