pūjā (‘worship’, ‘veneration’, ‘homage’)

At its most general, any form of ritualized veneration or devotion (bhakti) directed towards any being (or object) deemed worthy of such attention. More specifically, ‘pūjā’ denotes the ritual worship of a deity in the form of an image (mūrti), typically involving the presentation of vegetarian and other offerings, and their return to the worshipper in the form of prasāda. Such worship may be of an iṣṭa- or kula-devatā in a domestic shrine, a grāma-devatā in the form of (e.g.) a rock or a tree in the open, or a great sectarian deity in a temple. The frequency, scale, and precise detail of a pūjā depend on the nature and location of the mūrti, the prescriptions of sacred texts or ritual manuals (paddhati), the nature of the occasion, and the intentions of the participant(s). The spectrum ranges from the recitation of a short invocatory mantra and the waving of an incense stick in front of an image on a calendar, or dangling in a three-wheeler, through simple offerings of flowers, sweets, and water, accompanied by darśana and the receipt of prasāda, to elaborate ritual sequences, performed up to four or five times a day by professional temple-pūjāris. This range is further extended in various līlās, and the complex temple and processional rites which accompany the numerous festivals celebrated across the year. Nevertheless, with the exception of the semi-congregational singing of kīrtanas or bhajans by certain bhakti groups, the precise form and purpose of a particular pūjā, and its expected benefits, remain predominantly a matter between the individual and the deity. What counts most is the concentrated intimacy of their relationship—a connection which, in the bestowal of prasāda, amounts to a temporary identification, or merger, of the devotee and the god.

Temple pūjā, usually performed by pūjāris, and the more elaborate domestic forms of devotion, usually performed by domestic priests or purohitas, include, as key components, ritual sequences, such as darśana and āratī, which may also be discrete acts of worship in themselves. Through the recitation of particular mantras, and the sounding of bells, drums, and other instruments, a typical sequence begins with the making-present of the deity, known as its awaking or ‘bidding’ (āvāhana), and ends with its ‘dismissal (visarjana). In-between, the god or goddess, in the form of the mūrti, is treated as an honoured guest: the aim is to please, entertain, and win favour by giving service (upacāra) through offerings and rites (also collectively and individually known as upacāra). These may include bathing the image, dressing it, fanning it, anointing it with sandalwood, offering it food, water, flowers, tulasī leaves, kunkum, incense, and other substances (including fire through the performance of āratī), and the circumambulation (pradakṣiṇā) of the garbhagṛha, all accompanied by the chanting of mantras (the essential part of each action), or, in some cases, the singing of bhajans. Some of the offerings made are kept by the temple, and some are returned to the worshippers as prasāda, the tangible form of the deity's blessing
—a blessing which, in the context of temple pūjā, may extend beyond the individual to the temple complex itself, and even the surrounding country (or, in the past, the king and his kingdom).
Puja is worship. The Sanskrit term *puja* is used in Hinduism to refer to the worship of a deity through observance of rituals including daily prayer offerings after a bath or as varied as the following:

- **Sandhyopasana**: The meditation on God as the light of knowledge and wisdom at dawn and dusk
- **Aarti**: Ritual of worship in which light or lamps are offered to the deities amid devotional songs and prayer chants.
- **Homa**: The offering of oblations to the deity in a duly consecrated fire
- **Jagarana**: Keeping vigil at night amidst much devotional singing as a part of spiritual discipline.
- **Upavasa**: Ceremonial fasting.

All these rituals for puja are a means to achieve purity of mind and focusing on the divine, which Hindus believe, can be a fitting stepping stone to knowing the Supreme Being or Brahman.

### Why You Need an Image or Idol for a Puja

For the puja, it is important for a devotee to set an idol or icon or a picture or even symbolic holy object, such as the shivalingam, salagrama, or yantra before them to help them contemplate and revere god through the image. For most, it is difficult to concentrate and the mind keeps wavering, so the image can be considered as an actualized form of the ideal and this makes it easy to focus. According to the concept of ‘Archavatara,’ if the puja is performed with utmost devotion, during puja god descends and it is the image that houses Almighty.

### The Steps of Puja in the Vedic Tradition
1. **Dipajvalana**: Lighting the lamp and praying to it as the symbol of the deity and requesting it to burn steadily till the puja is over.

2. **Guruvandana**: Obeisance to one’s own guru or spiritual teacher.


4. **Ghantananada**: Ringing the bell with appropriate [mantras](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandala) to drive away the evil forces and welcome the gods. Ringing the bell is also necessary during ceremonial bath of the deity and offering incense etc.

5. **Vedic Recitation**: Reciting two Vedic mantras from Rig Veda 10.63.3 and 4.50.6 to steady the mind.

6. **Mantapadhyana**: Meditation on the miniature shrine structure, generally made of wood.

7. **Asanamantra**: Mantra for purification and steadiness of the seat of the deity.

8. **Pranayama & Sankalpa**: A short breathing exercise to purify your breath, settle and focus your mind.

9. **Purification of Puja Water**: Ceremonial purification of the water in the *kalasa* or water vessel, to make it fit for use in puja.

10. **Purification of Puja Items**: Filling up the *sankha*, conch, with that water and inviting its presiding deities such as Surya, Varuna, and Chandra, to reside in it in a subtle form and then sprinkling that water over all the articles of puja to consecrate them.

11. **Sanctifying the Body**: *Nyasa* with the *Purusasukta* (Rigveda 10.7.90) to invoke the presence of the deity into the image or idol and offering the *upacharas*.

12. **Offering the Upacharas**: There are a number of items to be offered and tasks to be performed before the Lord as an outpouring of love and devotion for god. These include a seat for the deity, water, flower, honey, cloth, incense, fruits, betel leaf, camphor, etc.

Note: The above method is as prescribed by Swami Harshananda of Ramakrishna Mission, Bangalore. He recommends a simplified version, which is mentioned below.

### Simple Steps of a Traditional Hindu Worship:

In the *Panchayatana Puja*, i.e., puja to the five deities – Shiva, Devi, Vishnu, Ganesha, and Surya, one’s own family deity should be kept in the center and the other four around it in the prescribed order.

1. **Bathing**: Pouring water for bathing the idol, is to be done with *gosrnga* or the horn of a cow, for the Shiva lingam; and with *sankha* or conch, for Vishnu or salagrama shila.
2. **Clothing & Flower Decoration**: While offering cloth in puja, different types of cloth are offered to different deities as is stated in scriptural injunctions. In the daily puja, flowers can be offered instead of cloth.

3. **Incense & Lamp**: Dhupa or incense is offered to the feet and deepa or light is held before the face of the deity. During arati, the deepa is waved in small arcs before the deity's face and then before the whole image.

4. **Circumbulation**: Pradakshina is done three times, slowly in the clockwise direction, with hands in namaskara posture.

5. **Prostration**: Then is the shastangapranama or prostration. The devotee lies down straight with his face facing the floor and hands stretched in namaskara above his head in the direction of the deity.

6. **Distribution of Prasada**: Last step is the Tirtha and Prasada, partaking of the consecrated water and food offering of the puja by all who have been a part of the puja or witnessed it.

The Hindu scriptures consider these rituals as the kindergarten of faith. When understood properly and performed meticulously, they lead to inner purity and concentration. When this concentration deepens, these external rituals drop off by themselves and the devotee can perform internal worship or manasapuja. Until then these rituals help a devotee on his path of worship.