

[The New Frontier](#)

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Hinduism in America; After Decades of Pioneering, 400,000 Hindus Are Settling Down on U.S. Soil

Suburban America 1983: stylish houses, sprawling shopping malls and modernistic churches. Not the place to expect to run into a Hindu temple gopuram's upsweeping lines and folds. But like a well-tooled buckle on the Southern U.S.'s "Sun Belt" the Sri Meenakshi Temple is stopping traffic in Pearland, a suburb outside Houston. In downtown Houston's skyscrapers, Asian Indian Hindus go to their corporate, law and medical offices for a typical day's work. Not too far away, on the arid Southwestern plains, one can see the temple's walls glow red in a Texas sunset. Setting aside his business reports while gazing out the window, Mr. Raj Devamurthy, an economic advisor, reminisces: "That, to me, is Hinduism in America. A temple you would normally see on the Ganges standing on the red earth of Texas. Like a dream!" It is a part of the American dream. That picture succinctly captures the New Saivite World's close-up investigation of Hinduism in America - the seeming "dichotomy between living in the world's richest nation and practicing the world's richest religion," as one American-born swami put it. U.S. Hinduism is close to 400,000 Indo-American Hindus living, working, raising families and, like all American, looking to improve the quality of their lives. The number one priority of that quest is now improving their religious lives.

"Now when my American friends ask about my religion...I can hold up my head and say, I am a Hindu!" - Ami Heda, a 13-year old Hindu wrote after her experiences at Sri Rajarajeshwari Peetham's Hindu Heritage Summer Camp. The lack of religious background Hindu kids born in America and their natural proclivity to be mainstream American is a sticky if not thorny issue. To tackle it and other similar challenges, the U.S. Hindu community is unleashing some of its collective power. Over a dozen full-scale temples dot the American landscape with more on the way. Hindu educational programs and facilities are coming out of the idea stage into textbooks and concrete reality.

Hindu temples are being planned or erected in major population centers throughout America. The future looks bright as leaders ponder the implementation

of high quality schools for Hindu American children and a joint national council or federation of autonomous temple societies. One fascinating trend is America's role change from an importer to an exporter of Hindu wisdom, religious leaders and facility blueprints - an exchange which would have been almost inconceivable ten years ago. Hindus in America, like the pioneers of other faiths who migrated here long ago, are carving out a new frontier for themselves on the vast US landscape. But pioneering isn't easy. It's the American spirit come to life - tough, challenging, day-to-day work, demanding stamina and drive. "It really takes blood, sweat and tears to successfully build something which has no precedent, like our Hindu temples. We are the first wave. Later we might see some glory in that. But now it's hard work," said one West Coast Hindu.

SWAMI VIEKANANDA'S HISTORIC VISIT

It has been hard work from the start. Hinduism and America shook hands about 90 years ago. Discounting the arrival of a handful of Indians in the U.S. in the 1800's, Hinduism's first real wave crashed on American shores in 1893 when the dynamic Swami Vivekananda electrified a Parliament of Religions audience in Chicago with the high-altitude flights of Vedanta. Swamiji imported the rudiments of Hinduism, and more than any other person met head-on the initial Christian resistance to what was considered an assault on their Protestant promised land.

Crisscrossing America on the lecture tour circuit, Swamiji once wrote: "Here in America are no ashramas. Would there was one! How I would like it, and what an amount of good it would do in this country!" Of course, he was responsible for introducing the first ashram-like institutions through the Vedanta Society (now numbering 13 with over one thousand members), but there were no markers pointing to today's richly diverse panoply of Hindu institutions. Swamiji might have taken a carriage ride down Bowne Street in Queens, N.Y. (a street founded on the idea of religious tolerance), but we will never know if he could foresee the current Bowne Street's Hindu Temple of North America with its gopuram rising against the New York skyline alongside Catholic spires, Protestant steeples and Jewish Stars of David. Ironically, India's industrialization was more or less self-born, while the real exodus of brains has been from the East to West as Asian Indians left India and Sri Lanka in search of professional fulfillment and financial success. In the process they have added significantly to America's reservoir of industry, high-tech and service sector talent.

The cross-pollination Swami Vivekananda touched off between Hinduism and America has grown into a multi-branched tree that stretches across the entirety of American mainstream life. Karma, reincarnation, yoga and guru are household words and concepts. Meditation techniques form a regular part of millions of American's lives. Holistic havens combine hatha yoga physiology, breath control, vegetarian nutrition, yogic psychology and biofeedback machines to rejuvenate and remake America's overstressed and over-indulged bodies and minds. Astro-and nuclear physicists alike have employed the awesome Dance of Sivanataraja and other Hindu theological concepts as singularly telling metaphors for their cosmic and microcosmic explorations. Millions of Americans came face to face with Shiva's deistic imagery through the Philadelphia Art Museum's 1981/82 "Manifestations of Shiva" cross-country exhibition. And millions more are being deeply moved by the stunning film, "Gandhi." A California Senator recently even introduced a bill legislating for a declared Gandhi Day. Ravi Shankar, sitarist, played with Yehudi Menuhin, classical violinist, and more recently L. Shankar, virtuoso violinist from South India, has fused the power of Karnatic improvisation with American "fusion jazz's" multidimensional electronic harmonies.

TV'S 'DALLAS' VS. EPIC, 'MAHABHARATA'

These are some of the peripheral effects of intersecting cultures, and in fact the Indian Hindu influence is apparent in more facets of American society than any other minority including Black and Hispanic. The gravitational hub of Hinduism in America though lies with the approximately 400,000 Hindu Asian Indians residing in America who have immigrated from India over the past two-plus decades and are raising families. They are now fully cognizing that their children are Americans, not Indians, and are Hindus, not Christians, or irreligious agnostics. Her Holiness Swami Saraswati Devyashram, spiritual head of the Holy Sankaracharya Order, U.S.A., and other members of the Order have closely and objectively observed the American Hindu children's situation. "Firstly, these children are born Americans. They were born here. And they very much want to fit in as Americans, to be accepted. They are puzzled about Christianity and there is a definite resistance to looking to Indian as a cultural and emotional base." For some children, given a tossup between the TV show "Dallas" and the scripture Mahabharata they will take "Dallas" and probably tell you there is as much intrigue in both so what's the difference. Most have not waivered that far, but as Swami Saraswati noted, "They are embarrassed...mostly because they don't have the background to understand and explain the depths of their religion."

AMERICA'S "BLUE-EYED" HINDUS

And then there are the "blue-eyed" Hindus, as Mr. Jerry Madden, an American self-converted Saivite Hindu, coins them. Telling a story of when he was an Army Ranger during World War II, Mr. Madden recounted how he had told the quartermaster issuing his dog tags that he was a Hindu (A section of the dog tags notes by initial - P for Protestant, etc. - the soldier's religion). The quartermaster was rudely indignant, and rather than argue, Mr. Madden accepted a substitute initial. Such were the sentiments in the 1940's. Mr. Madden's "blue-eyed" Hindus are born American citizens who have either self-adopted Hinduism or have formally entered, say, Saivism, through an orthodox ceremony. In every sense of the word they are Hindus, except they weren't born into the religion. As H.H. Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, the American-born spiritual leader of Saiva Siddhanta Church, observed, "They are Eastern souls in Western bodies - Hindus from the inside out, rather than outside in." Unofficial estimates of the numbers of this group run in the tens of thousands including the I.S.K.C.O.N. Hare Krishna adherents who are the most visible representatives of Hindu adoptives. Combined with the born Hindu populous, that's about 450,000 Hindus in the U.S., or 1 out of every 555 Americans, making Hinduism the second largest minority religion in America, trailing behind Islam with its substantial American Black constituency.

Exploding at a 400% increase, the total U.S. Asian Indian population ballooned during the 1960's and then doubled again during the 70's to a formidable 361,000. Add on the 20,000 per year Asian Indian immigration quota for the past three years and the demographics top 420,000. (Between 10 and 15% of that figure is of other religious, eg., Sikhism) The net result: a noted burst in political and consumer clout; a 1982-awarded status as a minority eligible for startup business loans from the federal Small Business Administration, and a micro baby-boom. It's the baby boom which is the single most important driving force in American Hinduism at this time. The kids are growing up fast, and "We don't know what they are growing up to. There's a big unknown before us," commented Dr. S. Sivasubramaniam, 37, a physician from the Potomac, Maryland, area who also serves as a trustee for the Shree Siva Vishnu Temple Society of North America (Washington D.C.).

DEAD-END DESTINATION : ATHEISTIC MATERIALISM OR CHRISTIANITY

When American-born Hindu children began arriving on the scene there was no built-in extended family unit-no grandparents, no elder aunts and uncles, no family pundits, few swamis and gurus, and no temples to forge a cohesive religion-cultural matrix. In a country where the intensity of a lifestyle is characterized by freeway lanes, the Hindu children found themselves on that freeway with no bumpers and no way to get off. Their destination: stark materialism or Christianity. TV bombards

viewers with Western culture's one-life, get-all-the-gusto-you-can model. A current Congressional debate involves the introduction of Christian prayer in public schools. Drug and alcohol abuse is a malignant cancer eating away at an alarming percentage of America's youth. Teenage promiscuity is a rule, not the exception. A recent nationwide Gallup poll showed that 44% of American Christian teenagers go through a serious "crisis of faith" during late adolescence. Teenage patterns in general are very consistent and American Hindu teenagers have also been noted to go through a "crisis in faith." Many simply become agnostic or atheistic.

NATION-WIDE MANDATE: BUILD LIVING HINDU TEMPLES

Over the past ten years, "A slow-motion panic set in. If we didn't start doing something concrete, we would have a disaster on our hands and only ourselves to blame," said one Hindu family man of Dallas. Ramesh Dewan, U.S. delegate, speaking at the 1982 Friends of India Society conference in Bombay, warned, "The overseas Indians are losing their Indian-ness very fast. By the next generation, the process will be completed." But the issue is far more serious than a matter of losing "Indian-ness." It's one thing to forego wearing a sari. It's entirely another to relinquish the beauties and sensibilities of Hindu womanhood. Many Hindu Americans feel the entire character makeup and moral fibre is at stake. "We were scared of the thought of the children growing up with no religious heritage," explained P. Vijayagopal, biochemistry professor at Louisiana State University who is a committee member of the New Orleans Temple Society. A very clear and persuasive mandate emerged from community leaders across the U.S: start from the ground up and build temples. In 1977 - almost within a year of each other, the Hindu community's first orthodox temples, the Pittsburgh Venkateshwara Temple and Hindu Temple of North America (Flushing, N.Y.) opened their doors to the public. Grassroots Hinduism had arrived and the temple boom was on! In the past six years a temple has been built or a temple site purchased for every year Hindus have been in the U.S: over 20. In 1982 two more major temples, the Sri Meenakshi Temple in Pearland, Texas, and the Sri Viswanatha Temple in Flint, Michigan, held their opening ceremonies and hooked into Hinduism's inner power line. This year a half-dozen more have spring construction schedules lined up. From Hawaii to the West Coast through the Sun Belt up the East Coast and across to "Smokestack America," temples are spread like a pioneer patchwork quilt.

THE GOOD AND BAD OF SPLIT TEMPLE SOCIETIES

But this rapid expansion took its toll. Division of interest in the trustee and officer level of many societies have caused delays and in some cases a crippling stalemate or even an early death. Most recently the Hindu Temple Society of Southern California with its Malibu Venkateshwara Temple just going into actual construction, went into Superior Court over a disputed election, and new elections were ordered by the judge. In some cases the society splits in two, even cloning itself, as in the case of the Siva Vishnu Temple Societies of North America in Washington D.C. and Bethesda, Maryland. In this case the division and healthy, like twins being born instead of a single child. Most community leaders attribute these birthing pains to human nature - personality clashes, ego battles, etc. - and not to any specific issues such as linguistic differences or North/South India enmity. But they do loom in the background as issues having been carried over from India.

Ideas for a council or federation of Hindu temple societies similar to the National Council of Churches (Christian) have been in the air for years, but as yet no gavel has pounded the table bringing such a council to order. Such a council's first purpose would be to act as a clearinghouse of organizational experience, know-how and ideas between the temple societies. Officially such a council doesn't exist, but unofficial know-how is occurring between quite a number of societies. Particularly the elder Pittsburgh and New York temples are offering their accumulated expertise to other budding temples. What would it take to pull such a council together? "Perhaps it would take some overshadowing, highly-respected body in India that everybody mutually listens to - like the Tirupati Temple," suggests Mr. A. Saravanapavan, a trustee for the Siva Vishnu Temple Society of North America. Other look to a more indigenous catalyst. "Some kind of financial or community crisis for a particular temple might serve as a rallying-point for bringing forth an official federation. They would need to come to the temple's aid in some organized fashion, and that might involve an official position," observed Dr. Sivasubramaniam.

"HINDUISM'S SPIRITUAL SUPERMARKET"

Hinduism in America exists on two levels, the community level and the organizational. If the baby-boom was motivating the Asian Indian Hindu families, an incredibly sudden and explosive interest in Eastern wisdom and ways fueled most of the yoga/neo-Hindu organizations that flooded America in the late 60's and 70's and swept away millions into mantras, meditation and the mysteries of Hindu philosophy. The explosion has long since dissipated, leaving in the U.S.A. a remarkably India-like group of disparate institutions - what some critics referred to as a "spiritual supermarket." From the very orthodox to the very outrageous,

yoga/neo-Hindu organizations are a colorful weave of the American social fabric. Chronologically, the very first Hindu spiritual leaders preceded by decades the emigration of Hindu families en masse to America, and the first semblance of a Hindu temple in the U.S. was built in San Francisco in 1959. By bearing the broadside of Christian fire and brimstone they, in sense, cleared the land for later settlement by born Hindus.

CAN AMERICANS BE PRACTICING HINDUS?

As a so-labeled social experiment, the I.S.K.C.O.N. Hare Krishna movement is a highly observed fishbowl that a lot of U.S. researchers have peered into. Transplanting lock, stock and bullock cart a piece of feudal Bengali religious and cultural life into urban and rural America has given I.S.K.C.O.N. a sky-high but ambivalent profile. Ask a downtown New York cab driver about Hinduism and predictably he will describe a Hare Krishna devotee. Even the World Almanacs naively define the extent of Hinduism in America by the Hare Krishna presence. With its often questionable fund raising techniques and other negative image problems, I.S.K.C.O.N. has been the target for many critics, including some Indo-Americans. In an effort to defend the Indo-American Hindu community's efforts of religious activity from the negative stigma of I.S.K.C.O.N. proselytization, these critics have in effect said that Americans imitating Hindus are bad news because they suggest to the American public that Hinduism is a proselytizing religion. "Some sects," Mr. C.V. Narasimhan, a former United Nations executive and now periodic advisor to Hindu temple societies, said in a public statement, "have given Hindu names to American nationals who, in turn, are taught to behave as though they have been converted to Hinduism." Most people though, born India and born American Hindus alike, see this attitude as unfounded and very misleading. At San Francisco's Himalayan Academy, a Saivite Hindu educational facility that specializes in schooling, preparing and counseling born Americans seeking formal entrance into Saivism, a senior swami explained, "Though not a proselytizing religion, Hinduism has historically always accepted into its fold those few who sincerely sought admission. Adoption or conversion to Hinduism is a scripturally sanctioned process." And as Hindu psychologist in Reno, Nevada stated, "Native American Hindus are simply out-practicing us at our own religion. It's almost humorous that we came to America for material prosperity and have bumped into a depth of Hindu spirituality which is even uncommon for India." Ironically, while some Hindus are taking Mr. Narasimhan's defensive stand, some Christian Churches are on the offense, doing their best to convert immigrating adherents of foreign religions to Christianity. This includes not only Hindus, but Buddhists as well. A case in point are the 18,000 Southeast Asia refugees who immigrated to Oregon in the 1980's and are now subject to some-time vice-like conversion pressures. Already 20% of one 1,600-member community have become

Christians - many simply as a way to become more American, or to gain economic favor.

Combined with the prevalent but erroneous idea that all Americans are born Christian, this Americans-can't-be-Hindu concept, if universally applied, has the potential of alienating born Americans from born Indians who are practicing the same religion, who are fellow Hindus. But the overall extent and depth of American adoption of Hinduism does indicate a full-scale amalgamation is underway. Indeed, American is the only country in the world where a non-Indian population has so thoroughly adopted the Hindu way of life and worldview. Another Himalayan Academy staff member went on to say, "Americans are not born Christian. To be American doesn't mean you are Christian, just as to be born in India doesn't mean you are Hindu. Many Americans are born in families with no religious affiliation - they are still living morally upright lives, just without a religious framework. These Americans come into Hinduism as adoptives." As for Americans who did become Christians: "They can enter Saivite Hinduism as converts, but only after rigorous schooling and a formal severance from their former religion so there is no overlapping of religious beliefs and loyalties."

LIKE A THREE-DIMENSIONAL CHESS GAME

By far the large majority of Hindus in America are not involved in the yoga/Hindu organizations. "Being born into the religion, growing up with it, they may not want a strict methodology or regimen," observed Dr. Sivasubramaniam. If they are involved, it is usually with an organization that closely fits traditional Hinduism and not the fad or ecumenical groups. As to their religious life at home, most families are finding what fits their particular schedule and inclinations. Although no figures are available, Mr. A. Saravanapavan, a Project Officer with the World Bank, feels that the slim majority of America's Hindu mother not joining the work force has greatly contributed to a growing religious stability and dedication in the Hindu home. But there is a long ways to go. Another source states that the number of Hindu women working in the U.S. is twice that of the national average. And as Dr. Sivasubramaniam points out, there is considerable workload pressure on the men and many don't have the time to practice the full depth of Hinduism, although there is a building groundwell to congregate on Fridays and weekends for religious activity.

Like a three-dimensional chess game with two or three playing board levels, the

interaction between the U.S. Hindu community and the Hindu organizational presence has seen both good moves by accident and by design. Factor in the hundreds of India cultural associations and societies, and the interaction gets fairly complex. The guidance systems, both practical and ideological, for America's temple societies have mostly been imported from India, but a number of the leading and more orthodox Hindu organizations in the U.S. have been in there spade for spade as the foundations were and are continuing to be dug. At the top of this list would be the Chinmaya Mission, the Sri Rajarajeshwari Peetham and Saiva Siddhanta Church. And the Hindu community movers and shakers are beginning to look more and more to the American Hindu institutions for advice, particularly the orthodox organizations where born Americans are the leaders and which themselves are involved in temple building. Their reasoning: born Americans have the know-how, the innate experience to guide Hindus and their affairs into a smooth assimilation with Americans and the Christian presence.

HINDU COMMUNITY IS BEGINNING TO FLEX ITS FINANCIAL MUSCLE

Each year billions of dollars are tithed (giving 10% of one's gross income) and donated by American Christians to the Catholic and Protestant Churches to perpetuate and expand their religious facilities and programs. By themselves the Methodists allocate almost \$100 million for international missionary work alone, including conversion activities in India. How much are Asian-Indian Hindus taking out of their pockets for their religion's well-being in America? The potential is considerable. As a high-income group that (in relation to other minorities) dominates the American professional-level job market, Hindus in America earn a lot and spend a lot. If a tithe system was employed within Hindu America, a commanding \$320 million a year could be pumped into its bloodstream. Within a decade several billion dollars would be circulating into trust funds, educational facilities, grants and temple endowments. That's the potential. The actual money flow is a drop-off-the cliff less, but still strong. Tens of millions of dollars are now invested in temple land and buildings. And the top four temples in the U.S. are receiving an estimated \$1.7 million a year in contributions and temple-earned income. In one month alone, the Hindu Temple of N.A. (Flushing NY) garners close to \$20,000 from hundi offerings and puja income. Add in the contributions, donations and other supportive funds going into the smaller temples and the leading Hindu institutions, and the total monetary infusion per year is in the tens of millions.

"E.T.'S" GOD AND GANDHI

As a combined front, the Hindu community and Hindu institutions are now seeing enough monetary overflow to begin investing in the future. Mortgages and loans are, for the older societies, within sight of being paid back. Maintenance is being easily met. With a foundation of temple worship laid, Hindu community leaders are beginning to assess the educational picture and put into motion small-scale, pilot programs. There have always been isolated pockets of parochial activity as parents and concerned Hindus would start classes in the home, or an Indian Society would offer periodic linguistic/cultural instruction, but many Hindus are seeing that those attempts have only been the starting spurt for a long four laps around the track.

Almost as a surprise to the adults, this realization and concern is also being echoed by Hindu adolescents themselves. "Teenagers [Hindu] are asking: why aren't we being taught our religion and heritage? They are really beginning to search for themselves," said Dr. Sivasubramaniam. He also observed that they are now using Hinduism and Indian civilization as subjects for their public school homework assignments. "Only in the last two years have I seen this," he reported. Growing almost organically within itself, this demand is beginning to be met. Several temples have started regular Sunday School-type classes. Both Chinmaya Mission and Saiva Siddhanta Church have developed special correspondence courses for Hindu children and are instrumental in setting up class structures around the U.S. But to date, the most popular and perhaps most effective activity has been the crop of annual youth camps springing up from coast to coast. Setting the benchmark, Sri Rajarajeshwari Peetham of the Holy Sankaracharya Order, USA, offers a comprehensive have-fun-and-learn camp in the Pocono Hills known as the Hindu Heritage Camp. Begun in 1978, the camp's attendance has jumped from 12 to 238 in 1982. The curriculum spans puja performance, Vedantic philosophy, spoken and written Sanskrit, hatha yoga, meditation and special peer discussions for teenagers. Plans for the 1983 camp include a final "Teen Super Session" focusing on "enlightened leadership." Swami Saraswati Devyashram attributes the impact of the camp to the fact that the camp staff relate to the Hindu kids in Western terms. Hindu ceremonies, philosophy and practices are given a scientific credibility. "And they relate to us well because we are born Americans just as they are," she explained. "They think in the same patterns as Americans." The camp staff uses "points of contact" between American culture or happenings and Hinduism to spark a connection and depth of understanding in the children. Discussions on who is "E.T.'S" God and about the movie, "Gandhi," for example, are employed. The Peetham also jumped light years ahead of everybody when in 1974 it bought 150 acres of Virginia countryside and set it aside for the future "Hindu American University." Envisioned as an open curriculum university, Swami Devyashram sees it graduating some of future Hinduism's greatest leaders. But to get to that future requires a lot of groundwork in the present. "Many Hindu families are sending their children to Catholic schools for a better quality education. Some children that come to our camp even go to Christian born-again schools and are exposed to their creationist fundamentalism," the Swami explained. "Our target is

to provide a viable alternative and I foresee a great expansion in educational/parochial facilities in the U.S."

U.S. HINDUS HAVE A COMPETITIVE EDGE

As a pioneering people and a people sending roots into American soil, Hindus have a great task before them. But American Hindus have a competitive edge - they are historically one of the most recent emigrating groups from India and Sri Lanka and therefore can draw on the successes, blunders and oversights of previous emigrant groups in other countries, such as Trinidad and South Africa. Hindus in America do have vast resources to build facilities that reflect the faith and background brought over with them from the East. But they run the risk of neglecting to balance out America's consuming consumer prosperity. A balance is needed. Otherwise, as Swami Devyashram states, "The temples will be museums with tour guides and the Hindu children will be Americans with no religious conscience."

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