

[Things Are Looking Up For Hindus Down Under](#)

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Things Are Looking Up For Hindus Down Under 10,000 Devotees and Forty Organization Celebrate a Bonzer Ganesha Visarjana in Sydney

A recent visit to New Zealand and Australia gave the Hinduism Today staff a new glimpse into the lives of our mates in the land of koalas and kangaroos. "Bonzer," by the way, is Aussie for "great or terrific."

Ever since Australia changed its "all-white" immigration policies in the 1960s the continent has received a continual influx of Hindus from India and Sri Lanka. The government has been especially accommodating of refugees from Lanka's civil strife, with the result that tens of thousands of former residents of that war-torn nation now call Australia home. Land is one reason the government is so inclined--land equal to three Indias, but with 1/40th the population. The world's smallest continent has become an agreeable new home for the Hindu immigrants who share in the country's high standard of living. There are major groups in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. Immigrant figures are not readily available for the whole country, but it is estimated 35,000 Indians and 25,000 Sri Lankans live in New South Wales, the state which includes Sydney and Melbourne.

Temples are being actively developed in all the major cities, serving as focal points for the community. The ones we visited, with some exceptions, were all in the same state: partly finished buildings on large parcels of land of five or ten acres.

In keeping with the expansiveness of the country, most temples are planned on a sizeable scale. Sydney has the most Hindus, the most temples and the most religious organizations. In a commendable show of unity, nearly all band together yearly for the Ganesha Visarjana festival in August-September. The festival is hosted by the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Helensburgh, a suburb of Sydney. This temple complex, as it is more accurately called, is a ten-acre lot on its own road, Temple Lane, with spacious, separate Vishnu and Siva temples. The day-long Visarjana program of puja, parades, speeches and cultural events culminated in the seaside immersion of Ganesha. The participation of the diverse religious, cultural and linguistic groups is manifold. Some put on outstanding dance and musical performances. Others run booths with books and information on their organization, still others operate the food concessions. A very impressive sight at the temple were the thousand or more people lined up awaiting archana inside the Siva temple [see photo right].

There were a host of distinguished speakers at the Visarjana, including Ian McManus, a Member of Parliament who delivered a message on behalf of the premier of New South Wales. McManus grew up in the area of the temple and remarked that he used to climb trees here when a boy. "Never in my wildest dreams did I envision what I see here today. How proud of yourselves you should be to have banded together, built this temple and integrated yourselves into the community in a pleasing way. In the 20 years that I've been in politics, I've never heard one complaint about the Hindu community."

Two temples we visited in Sydney were the Minto underground Siva temple and the Murugan temple. In the case of Minto, a small existing house serves as temporary temple and priest quarters. The priest here is very popular with the congregation, especially for his youth programs. The rather

turbulent karma of this temple to date appears nearly quieted. The trustees are looking forward to recommencing the stalled construction shortly.

The Murugan temple has built an inexpensive hall which serves now as a temporary temple (and later as a community hall) while they raise money to commence construction of the actual temple. This temple has a large proportion of Sri Lankans. One unexpected and very great benefit of the refugee flow out of Sri Lanka is the availability here of excellent Sri Lankan priests. Sri Arumugam Kurukkal is priest here at the Murugan temple. This has made for a happy situation. The priests are well cared for and respected by the community; the community feels more stable having its traditional priests.

The Ganesha temple in Melbourne is situated in an urban area (the other temples are on the outskirts of town) and has had the misfortune to locate next to a fundamentalist Christian lady who has given them endless problems. They operate under a very restrictive use permit--e.g., if they run a festival a half-hour late, complaints are made to the city council the next day. The temple is largely finished, and fund raising is underway here to buy out (at the suggestion of the city council) the complaining neighbor. The excellent priest here is Sri Jnanasekara Kurukkal of Sri Lanka.

The Siva-Vishnu temple is just 30 minutes drive away, a short hop by Australian standards, where everything is far away from everything else. This temple, designed by Sri V. Ganapati Sthapati of Madras, is well conceived and located in the center of a large acreage. It has two main shrines under one large roof, one for Lord Siva and one for Lord Vishnu. Around the raised central area (which has a hardwood floor) are placed shrines for perhaps two or three dozen additional Gods and Goddesses. This temple has no immediate neighbors, hence no

complaints and is planning for a chariot-pulling road and outdoor festivals.

Perth with its European ambiance and appearance is quite a change from the rest of Australia. On some streets one could just as well be in Switzerland. Perth regards itself, with some justification, as more sophisticated than the other major cities. Here Hindus are mostly professionals or self-employed. Their temple is located on the outskirts of the city, on a five-acre lot between an existing Christian church and a Chinese temple being built by a man who won a lottery. A small building has been put up for worship now, and a grand Siva temple is planned for the future. Here as at other temples effort is made to adapt the worship to encompass both North and South Indian traditions. The priest, Dr. Somaskanda Kurukkal from Sri Lanka, first does a traditional Agamic puja to the Gods, then will lead everyone in the arati song while offering camphor.

Our overall impression was quite favorable. Government policy has been especially generous with the Sri Lankan refugees, many of whom fled in a desperate state. Discrimination is certainly a problem, but perhaps less so than in, for example, the UK where there is too little land for too many people. Also, the economy of the country is in relatively good shape. One rarely sees, for instance, an old car on the road. The Minto temple has the most organized program for training children, though other temples are not neglecting this area. The organizers of the Visarjana are starting to hand over pieces of the event to be run by the young adults--a proven way to get greater youth interest and participation. If Hinduism can be successfully carried to the next generation, then it will indeed have a bright future in Australia.

Sidebar: Australia - very briefly

Australia is the sixth largest country on Earth and has seventeen million citizens. Its population density is just six per square mile. Much of the land is so arid that 40 acres is required to graze one sheep, who outnumber people ten to one. Only six percent of the land is arable, mostly along the coasts.

Australia has abundant natural resources, including plenty of coal and oil, uranium, gold, and nearly all of the world's opals. The standard of living here is excellent, three in four people own their own homes, literacy is nearly 100%, and life expectancy among the world's highest. Life is relatively secure, so much so that residents are able to spend twice as much money on gambling as on national defense. Very popular are cricket and "Australian Rules" football--a brutal game characterized by its minimalist rules where pummeling one's opponent seems to uninitiated observers as much the objective as scoring a goal.

Australia was originally a penal colony for England. Criminals--who could be as young as 14 and convicted of as little as petty theft--were "transported" here for imprisonment. If they survived the sea voyage and managed to complete their sentence, they could return to England, or accept land and stay. Many Australians count one or more of these freed convicts among their ancestors.

Each major town has its own ambiance. Sydney seems like a descendant of the old American West, a bit rough around the edges. Melbourne is a vast city laid out with broad brush strokes. In most Western planned cities, blocks are about 1/2 per mile. In Melbourne city blocks are more like 4 to a mile and ordinary boulevards six lanes wide. Perth is a complete change from the other cities and is quite European in ambiance. It is in an interestingly central location for Hindus, approximately equal distance from Singapore, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and South

Africa.

Australia has gone through several identity crises. First it was aligned with England, then with the onset of World War II, switched to the United States on whom it still ultimately depends for defense. Geographically and therefore economically, however, Australia is nearest to Asia; its natural trading partners are Indonesia, Japan, China and other Asian countries. More effort has been made in recent years to develop these ties, as well as an independent cultural identity.

The Australian Aborigines may have arrived on the continent 100,000 years ago from Southeast Asia. They have an obvious physical and spiritual relationship to the people of South India. Like Hindus, they believe in the Gods, rituals, the spirit world and reincarnation. In 1986 they numbered just 228,000. An Aboriginal leader, Herb Patton, summarized their situation by telling *Hinduism Today*, "It is surprising we survived to tell our tale"--such was the genocidal treatment afforded them by government decree and missionary zeal. Only in the 1960s did the government really take their plight seriously. Among other reforms, they were finally given citizenship and the right to vote.

Now, the teaching concerning the atman: the atman is below, it is above, it is behind, it is before, it is in the South, it is in the North. The atman indeed is all that is. He who sees, reflects and knows this--he has joy in the atman--Sama Veda, Chandogya Upanishad 7.24.2