

[Thailand's Hindus Parade Ganga to Bangkok Temples](#)

Category : [April 1988](#)

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From the air Thailand spreads north into the buckling folds of the Himalayas like one amorphous and shining green rice field. That its rich alluvial delta is fed by far eastern Himalayan rivers might suggest a flow of wisdom and culture from India into Thailand, "the land of the free." There was. However it didn't come from India, but from Hindu/Buddhist Cambodia. Thailand is now 93% Buddhist. Yet, right in downtown Bangkok, snuggled here and there on exhaust-choked thoroughfares and Thai-eatery lanes are Hindu temples. Lots of them. And there is the Hotel Rama, named after the still-living and much-loved dynasty of Thailand. The royal house, in turn, adopted the title Rama in the late 1400's from the Hindu epic Ramayana.

In the hotel's lobby is an elegant Ganesha shrine, gilded in the same beautiful, glinting fashion as the Buddhist temples. Besides Buddha, Ganesha is an especially favorite God. His images are everywhere, even sold with fake antiquing right next to teak woodcraft and mountains of colorful vegetables at the famed Thai water markets (much of Thailand is accessed by water ways rather than roads).

Bangkok in old imperial days was called Krung Thep, "city of devas." And Bangkok is the epicenter of Thailand's Hindu and Sikh population, occupied mainly in business and as service professionals. They turned out in force and with special aplomb to celebrate the Thai King Rama IX Adulyadej's 60th birthday (December, 1987), a very auspicious event for the astrologically fastidious and very religious Buddhist monarchy. This July, '88, his reign will be the longest - 42 years - in the dynasty's seven robust centuries.

Wanting to show the Hindu support of King Rama IX and simultaneously bring all Thailand Hindu organizations and institutions together for a day of unity. Pandit Vidyadhar Shuklaji, Srimat Krishna Pawa and other Hindu leaders organized a yatra, "religious parade," to escort a pot of Ganges water as a gift for the King's birthday ablutions. The vessel of sacred water was collected at the fabulously holy

and beautiful Gangotri gorge near the source of the river in the northwest Himalayas. It was flown to Thailand by Swami Lokeshwarananda Giri.

A large crowd of Hindus assembled for the yatra-empowering ceremonies in the grayish dawn outside Vishnu Mandir in Bangkok. Undeterred by a slight and short drizzle, the pilgrimage quickly gathered momentum visiting a succession of temples including the Erawan Temple of Lord Brahma, one of Hinduism's very rare Brahma temples. It is managed by the Thai Brahmins, a 4,000-family body of Hindu priests who have been associated with the Thai royal family since the late 1400's. By midmorning the yatra had swelled to 2,000 people, a record crowd for Hindu participation. The pilgrim's white, yellow and orange dress and constant singing and dancing was a celebration of Hindu culture interweaving with a metallic Buddhist city.

At the culmination of the yatra, Swami Lokeshwarananda handed over the precious Ganga water to the Royal Brahmin priest at his temple. The Royal Brahmin priests are the Hindu astrological guides of the monarchy, consulted on a multitude of annual occasions. He would convey the Ganga personally to King Rama IX. For the Thailand Hindus it was a historic expression of Hindu solidarity.

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