

[Special Feature: Hindu Temples of the West Adjust, Adapt, Improvise...](#)

Category : [October/November/December 2012](#)

Published by dharmalingam on Sep. 01, 2012

Special Feature

Hindu Temples of the West Adjust, Adapt, Improvise...

Local community needs, from counseling to funerals, extend beyond the present-day functions of most temples in India

The first temples built in the west were intended to provide immigrants a familiar place for worship, something akin to what they were accustomed to in India. The initial challenges were largely logistical--selecting a location, dealing with financing and zoning, bringing temple artisans and cajoling priests to cross the ocean. Today those issues have mostly been mastered and Hindu temples have begun to expand, not always willingly, into other forms of service needed to meet the requirements of the faith community: counseling, youth education, elder care, disaster response and interfaith dialogue. The evolution of these ancillary forms of service is under intense discussion. We invite you into the conversation through interviews with leaders in the US and Canada.

Sample spread from this article

SPECIAL FEATURE

Hindu Temples of the West Adjust, Adapt, Improvise...

Local community needs, from counseling to funerals, extend beyond the present-day functions of most temples in India

THE FIRST TEMPLE BUILT IN THE WEST WERE DESIGNED TO PROVIDE HINDUISMS A FAMILIAR place for worship, something akin to what they were accustomed to in India. The initial challenge, it seems largely logistical—selecting a location, dealing with financing and zoning, bringing temple artisans and coping priests to cross the ocean. Today those issues have mostly been mastered and Hindu temples have begun to expand, not always willingly, into other forms of service needed to meet the requirements of the faith community: counseling, youth education, elder care, disaster response and interfaith dialogue. The evolution of these auxiliary forms of service is under intense discussion. We invite you into the conversation through interviews with leaders in the US and Canada.

© HINDUISM TODAY MAGAZINE, NOVEMBER 2014. PHOTOGRAPHY: PRADEEP

What's new? (clockwise from above) Female Deities at the Hindu Temple of Minnesota in a song. Raja Ganesha, Mahadeva (Jai), prasad performs Gauraharan, puja in front of the Minnesota central sanctum, in a room that could be right out of India. Adivasi program performs for worship at the Maryland Hindu Vishnu Temple, at the beginning of a program, and preaching-called practitioners hold each other from joy or tears at the end. East March in Indianapolis, Canada, devotees are greeted by the puja with "Har Har Mahadev" and respond for some with their hands raised.

View this article in all its graphic richness on page 18 of the free [Electronic Edition](#)

This report was inspired by Hinduism Today's participation in the First Hindu Priests' Conference, as reported on page 30. In fact, it may be useful for you to first read that article and then come back to this one. It's OK, we'll wait here....

Hindu temples in the west find themselves on the cusp of change--challenging, unexpected, imperative change. Slowly new needs and duties are infiltrating their lives, forcing them to respond and evolve. There is no rule book or precedent to call upon, since conditions in India are so radically different. Suddenly managers and professional priests who know full well how to perform the most exquisite rituals are confronted with confounding calls for help. Participate in a local interfaith council? Develop a curriculum for youth studies? Give a tour to a high school class and explain Hinduism to them in thirty minutes? For all these needs, new skills must to be learned. And those are the easy ones. Try dealing with domestic violence, a Hindu teen in police custody or hundreds of refugees from a natural disaster arriving on your temple doorstep.

However, there is a wealth of wisdom out there to be called upon, derived from the accumulated experiences and practical knowledge of established temples and other immigrant communities who have been doing this for 200 years. Following these leads, temple managers are learning to thrive and avoid the pitfalls. At the same time, there is controversy about just where the limits lie.

Seeking scriptural guidance, we consulted an Agama expert, Dr. S.P. Sabharathnam Sivacharyar of Chennai. We asked him for a list of temple activities (below) found in the Saiva Agamas, which are the accepted authority governing temple design, construction, worship and general operation. We were surprised to learn that his list includes most of the "new" functions being performed by temples in the West. Even disaster relief is there. Apparently temples are arising to fulfill the functions of the traditional village--not only providing a place of worship but seeing to the spiritual, cultural, educational and even security needs of the community.

Interfaith, Education & Holidays

Invariably, soon after a group decides to build a temple, they are approached by the local interfaith council, whose members are delighted to invite new fellowships to join their dialogs and activities. In response, a Hindu representative is sent to the periodic council meetings.

Dr. Anantanand Rambachan, professor of religion at St. Olaf College and a frequent lecturer at the Hindu Temple of Minnesota, is a veteran participant in the interfaith movement. He told Hinduism Today, "The Hindu representative is often an amateur--an engineer, doctor or economist who is a self-taught Hindu specialist. These people from other traditions are highly trained in theology."

Fortunately, the interfaith movement itself owes much to Hindu ideas, and participation comes easily. For example, Pandit Roopnauth Sharma of Toronto's Ram Mandir is vice president of the Ontario Multi-Faith Council, which represents all religions in the province. He has also helped to create multi-faith teams to counsel hospital patients and people caught up in the correctional system.

A related public service is giving the opening blessing at public events, as local

governments seek to be inclusive of all religions represented in their jurisdiction. This takes the form of opening city council meetings, or other government functions, farm fairs and hospital inaugurations. In the most famous of all such blessings, Maryland's Sri Siva Vishnu Temple provided the priest for the celebration of Diwali at the White House.

Temple representative are occasionally invited to speak at churches, synagogues and mosques. Sometimes interfaith work leads to "pulpit exchange." For example, Pandit Sharma delivered a sermon at the rabbi's synagogue on Friday evening; the rabbi did the same at the temple on Sunday morning.

Requests from local schools, elementary through college, to bring groups to the temple for a field outing are common. The goal is to give the students a basic introduction to Hinduism, so it is relatively easy to train a set of volunteers in a standard presentation. Dr. Siva Subramaniam of Maryland's Siva Vishnu Temple reports that his team created a volunteers' handbook which explains each of the temple Deities as well as the temple architecture. He especially enjoys touring older students: "With university students, there will be a discussion of the differences in philosophy, as most of them are Christians. We try to correct stereotyped impressions." Tours tend to have a significant impact on young students, as a Hindu temple with its Deities and Sanskrit chanting may well be their first exotic religious experience.

Speaking of unanticipated demands placed on a temple, consider holidays. The US has several secular federal holidays which resonate with Hindus, and which some of us celebrate with the rest of the country. On January 1, New Year's Day, many Hindus go to the temple, even though it is not the Hindu new year. The second Sunday in May is Mother's Day, an American invention first observed in 1908. Not associated with any religion (and not an official holiday), it is enthusiastically celebrated with special pujas and programs by all temples interviewed. Father's Day, in June, is observed by some, though in a simpler manner. It is interesting that Thanksgiving is largely ignored--perhaps because it is thought to be Christian or perhaps due to the nearly mandatory sacrifice of a turkey.

Media Outreach

Nearly every temple has a web site, ranging from the basic (Hindu Temple of Arizona) to the functional (Hindu Temple Society to North America) to the spectacular (BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir Houston). Most websites aim only to

keep devotees informed of events and activities at the temple, and not so much as a source of information and inspiration about the religion.

A related area is media outreach, particularly seeing that press releases are given to local publications announcing upcoming events or explaining festivals and providing responses to inquiries from local reporters. They may exist, but we did not encounter in our interviews anyone specifically tasked with media coordination. In all cases, we were speaking with temple trustees who handled these matters directly. As with everything else, they have learned on the job, and there is likely room for improvement.

Youth Involvement

Hindu temples in the West devote great effort toward engaging their youth. Every temple we interviewed has extensive classes, usually on Sunday and often running from preschool through high school, plus summer camps. There is no standardized course of study: the material has been developed locally, on an ad hoc basis.

Much of what is taught are stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas. Less emphasized are the history of Hinduism, theology, ethics, yoga, meditation and the esoterics of temple worship--its meaning, significance and effect on one's life. All temples offer language, music and dance classes, with the latter two usually given on a fee basis by professional teachers. All these are held on weekends; absent is any kind of day care facility for little children during the week.

Dr. Srinivasa Yegnasubramaniam is a retired scientist who has been associated with the Sri Venkateswara Temple and Community Center in Bridgewater, New Jersey; he is also a key supporter of the Sringeri Sadhana Center in Pennsylvania. He recommends that "temples focus more on activities which bring our children into understanding the basics of our beliefs. The present system doesn't convey how to understand the rituals, so the children think them primitive and superstitious. They do not relate to them and consequently do not want to come to the temple."

Nevertheless, youth are an important part of the volunteer corps of each temple. In some, they serve alongside the adults wherever needed; in others, specific areas of responsibility are carved out--controlling parking during festivals, for example. London's BAPS Swaminarayan Naesden Temple is without compare in this respect.

As just one example, the operation of their shoe checking station for Diwali is entirely under the control of youth ages 12 to 15, with nominal adult oversight. The children themselves pass on the skills to the next group, and the task is performed flawlessly each year. This typifies the BAPS policy of getting the children invested in the organization by giving them "ownership" of specific areas of responsibility.

In America the nearest parallel is at Dallas Fort Worth. There the youth are responsible for organizing the temple's huge Holi festival, the annual Mother's Day celebration and parts of other events, such as the Diwali rangoli competition. Holi is a big hit with the youth because their non-Hindu friends are eager to participate in this exuberantly joyous festival, dousing one another (and any nearby authority figures) with bright colors. Temple trustee Ranna Jani admits they have to repaint the hall afterwards, even though colors are supposed to be thrown only outside. But "it needs painting yearly anyway," she reasons.

In Texas, Pandit Rajendra Sharma--now retired from the Hindu Worship Society of Houston--reports that the Lakshmi Narayan Mandir has a youth-run program of bhajan, kirtan discourses and havan from 10:30 to 12:30 every Sunday. He lamented that parents sometimes put a damper on their children's enthusiasm. "One young man at our temple used to wake his parents up every Sunday morning, 'Let's go to the mandir.' They did this for six or seven months, then stopped. When I met him later and asked what happened, he confided, 'My parents do not get up in the morning on Sunday.'"

Nonreligious activities may also be organized for the youth. Pandit Rajendra has organized soccer and basketball. In Toronto, the temples take sports to a different level with their own cricket league and a tournament each year. Otherwise, we did not hear many reports of temple-organized sports activities, probably because they are abundantly available in other forums.

Also in Toronto, it is a requirement that all high-school seniors perform forty hours of community service. The Ram Temple there puts them to work cooking, cleaning, washing, ushering, etc.

Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts are popular in most American churches. Many Christian churches sponsor troops which meet on the premises; the Mormons in particular

have an extensive scouting program. We did not find any Hindu temple with a scouting program, even though there is at least one series of Hindu scout merit badges (www.naha.us).

Many temples provide secular education programs for the youth, such as preparatory classes for SAT tests, and a few have debating teams. Contrary to what one might think, such activities appear to be appropriate for temples, as they fall under the education functions described in the Agamas.

Though the temples we interviewed are generally aware of the needs of college students, they offer only a few token programs to address them, such as organizing transportation and supplying priests for campus events held by Hindu student organizations. Students at the University of Maryland have taken matters into their own hands. Once a semester they hire a bus and bring 30 or 40 students to visit four area temples. They go in the morning to one temple, have darshan and breakfast, then to another for darshan and lunch, the third for darshan and an obligatory snack, and ending at the last for worship and dinner.

Counseling and Crisis Response

Counseling and intervention is a touchy area. Dr. Yegnasubramaniam noted that during his time as a trustee, the temple steered clear of such activities, wary of legal ramifications. The Nashville Ganesha Temple has a midway solution: they invite local experts to address meetings of selected groups at the temple to explain their services. When a certified marriage counselor described what he does and the confidentiality he provides, at least two couples went in for help. Dr. Rambhachan points out that temples already have a stock of experienced counselors: retired medical doctors, who have basic training in counseling and psychology. "Perhaps," he suggests, "there are people already in the community who may be called upon to serve in these roles, or train for them."

In India it is common to consult a priest for astrological advice, but Western temples are leery of having priests venture beyond the setting of auspicious dates. Pandit Sharma of Toronto cautions, "To identify an appropriate date, that is not high level astrology, but to decide on someone's future, I do not encourage that." Nevertheless, congregants do consult priests about difficulties in life--in business or health, for example--often requesting expiatory rites on their behalf. This is not counseling in the Western sense, and the temples tend not to interfere with the practice. One trustee said legal liability could result if they promoted it. The

Nashville Ganesha Temple forbids its priests to offer astrological advice in any form.

Some temples do find ways deal with family crises, such as domestic abuse and the problems faced by single mothers. The Shiva Vishnu Temple in Maryland created a Mitra Mandala (Circle of Friends) to offer free counseling. Dr. Subramaniam explains, "It is a group of people, including a social worker, a psychologist and lay people, who are available to any devotee for any problem, including spousal abuse, problems with the kids or with elderly parents."

In May, 2012, the Hindu Temple of Minnesota launched a confidential crisis hot line called Your Crisis Center (or YCC). The center functions as a referral service, directing people to the agencies or professionals who can help them. Dr. Shashikant Sane, the temple president, explained, "We make a clear-cut statement that we are not the primary treatment people; we're the advisors and this is done exclusively on a voluntary basis by the people who are being called." They worked out this system in consultation with the temple's lawyers to avoid legal entanglement.

The Nashville Ganesha Temple has a program specifically to help single mothers. Radha Kirtane shared, "We have fifteen single mothers in the community. It is not easy; half of them do not have family support and are in financial need." These single mothers, she points out, tend to be isolated. Notably, the Agamas urge temples to help single mothers and widows, including providing employment at the temple if that is needed.

In many cities, local Indian associations provide support for single mothers and other community members in distress. Examples are the India Association of North Texas in Dallas and India House in Houston. When there is a strong association nearby, the temples will refer people to them, instead of developing their own programs.

We encountered only one temple with an extensive counseling program for youth: Toronto's Ram Temple has engaged with the local judicial system, and Pundit Sharma has personally represented youth at legal hearings. Representatives from most temples reported they have encountered few or no problems of this nature among the youth. Beyond this one program, few temples said they had ventured

into offering legal support, though they would provide referrals to such services.

A specialized form of counseling is provided by trained chaplains. A chaplain provides spiritual counseling for members of all faiths in a hospital or hospice setting, on a college campus, in the military or on call with the local police and fire department. There are only a few Hindu chaplains in North America, including one in the US Army; so temples are often called upon to fulfill that role, such as by visiting sick Hindu patients in local hospitals. Until recently, chaplaincy was a viable professional career choice for the right person. But like the religion editors of local newspapers before them, hospital chaplains as a group have become victims of budget cuts in our troubled economy. As discussed at the Pittsburgh Priest Conference, the profession is also undergoing a change--from "chaplaincy" to "spiritual counseling services," with part-time volunteers staffing once-paid positions.

Kunda Vaikunth of the Nashville Ganesha Temple brought an unusual perspective to the discussion. "I work in a psychiatric hospital and find the people brought up in India are not willing to use the counseling services available to them. I'm not sure how beneficial it is to that generation. It's a different story for the younger generation raised here in the US, those under 30, because their mindset is different. But marriage and other counseling services for people who are raised in India--it does not work."

Weddings and Marital Support

Just as in India, Western temples perform weddings--either supplying the priest for another venue or holding the wedding in a temple hall. Surprisingly, Dr. Sabharatham tells us the Agamas do not sanction marriages being conducted at temples, even though this practice is found in India.

To make a wedding official in the West, the person conducting it must be duly authorized by the state or province in which it is performed. The authorization procedure is usually simple, but necessary: any lapse can bring legal consequences. Once a priest at a New Jersey temple performed a wedding for a Hindu couple even though he was not registered with the state. He asked another priest to provide the necessary certificate. A few years later the husband filed for divorce, and the marriage certificate was deemed a forgery. Legally speaking, no marriage had taken place. This led to a complex legal nightmare involving custody of the children, visa issues and more. The temple now insists that couples have a civil ceremony in

addition to the wedding at the temple.

Ranna Jani, a founding trustee of the Dallas/Fort Worth Hindu Temple, recalls a match-making service her team attempted. It was not successful, and the trustees ultimately concluded it was not something the temple should be doing. Just as in India, though, the parents and couple consult the priests regarding astrological compatibility for a proposed match, and always for choosing the auspicious day for the wedding.

The Catholic Church has a well-regarded counseling series for engaged couples called "When Families Marry," which discusses everything from finances to who does the housework. But only one temple of those interviewed has offered premarital counseling beyond the astrological assessment. When pandit Rajendra Sharma was involved with the Hindu Worship Society of Texas, he talked with youth about marriage. He reports that those whose parents were not happily married commonly queried, "Why should I want to get married and become miserable like them?" His basic advice was "Getting married is very easy; staying married is difficult. You have to give and take, work it out, talk to each other, compromise."

Looking After the Elderly

Concern for the elderly inexorably faces each temple community. Seniors may be among the temple's most active attendees, and often there are programs just for them.

Traditionally a couple is responsible for the care of their aging parents. In India family-based care continues (though high-end retirement homes are being built even there). Many in the West are not able or willing to shoulder this duty, and temple groups try to fill the gap. Some, like the Hindu Temple of Minnesota and the Siva Temple in Flint, Michigan, have a plan in place to provide formal old folks' housing nearby. The 25-unit Ananda Bhavan residence at the Vishnu Mandir in Toronto, completed in 2010, is an example.

The Maryland Siva Vishnu Temple has a senior citizens' club that meets once a week, arranges lectures on topics seniors are interested in and organizes a program called "gentle yoga." Club members also mentor the youth in their areas of expertise, passing on decades of hard-earned knowledge. Dr. Subramaniam told

Hinduism Today they are considering a home visitation program for the housebound. Another temple invites government experts to explain tax issues to seniors and is setting up a hotline specifically for seniors' urgent needs.

Temples in the West vary in their attitudes toward the elderly. Some suggested that families or other community organizations should take responsibility. One trustee admitted, "Our religious professionals associated with a temple are the priests, and they have neither time nor training to handle these new areas of concern."

Kunda Vaikunth of the Nashville Ganesha Temple described an experimental system to transport elderly people to the temple on Sunday. On that day buses follow a reduced schedule. But renting a van and arranging for drivers became an organizational nightmare, and the project was dropped. "It's easy to jump into many areas that people would like to see," Kunda cautioned, "but it's hard to sustain them."

Community Service

Public social service is part of the mix, most commonly medical camps, food drives and disaster relief. Medical camps, of course, are logical, given the Hindu community's large number of physicians. Most conduct these once a month, offering a basic health checkup with advice on follow-up for potentially serious problems. The Dallas/Fort Worth Temple provides a free clinic run by volunteer doctors every other Sunday. Temple devotees and local neighbors alike use its services. Blood drives have become popular in recent years.

At least two temples in the US--Minnesota and Dallas/Fort Worth--have participated in court-ordered programs, where service at the temple (yard work, for example) is done to meet a sentence requiring a certain number of hours of community service.

The Nashville Ganesha Temple participates in the local projects of Habitat for Humanity, a highly respected Christian-inspired organization that builds homes for poor people using volunteer labor. The temple joins with other religious organizations to raise money and enlist volunteers--usually fathers and sons--to build homes in their area.

Food drives, contributions to the local food bank and preparing meals for the homeless are more and more common, as is raising money for disaster relief. Many temples raised funds after the 2004 tsunami, mostly for those areas impacted in India. Several sent representatives to Tamil Nadu to oversee use of the funds. When the 2001 Gujarat earthquake destroyed 400,000 homes, the Nashville Ganesha Temple raised money by inviting the local community for tours. Radha Kirtane commented, "I think this was the first time that the Nashville people saw the temple for what it was and how things were done. They also enjoyed the food."

Rarely, disaster comes knocking on one's own door. In 2005 the Dallas/Fort Worth Temple took in hundreds of refugees bused to Texas from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Then three weeks later, they were hosting evacuees from Hurricane Rita. Even Kauai's Hindu Monastery, home of Hinduism Today, became involved in disaster relief following Hurricane Iniki in 1992. The most powerful (Category 5) hurricane to ever strike the Hawaiian islands, Iniki laid waste to the little island. The monastery provided spiritual solace and material assistance to neighbors, baking bread each day since electricity was down and neighbors all had electric stoves. Most appreciated of all, it provided easy access to the Wailua River for bathing during the ensuing six weeks without running water in homes.

The recent influx of Bhutanese refugees from camps in Nepal has provided a service opportunity. Because the refugees have been settled in major cities across the country, most are near a Hindu temple--practically the only thing they find familiar in America. The Dallas/Fort Worth Temple responded by setting up a committee to help on many fronts: transportation, money, finding apartments, jobs, driving lessons, English lessons and advice on how to live in the West. The Nashville temple had its high school students teach English and computer skills. "Initially," recalls Radha Kirtane, "the Bhutanese were scared of anything other than their own group. At the time some of them converted to Christianity because the churches gave them financial help which Hindus did not initially. But now it is very different. It is great to see how far they have come."

In some areas the refugees have settled in, while other areas receive a fresh influx. The receiving organizations who initially help the refugees are often Christian. The funds they get for the program come from the federal government, and in theory any attempts at conversion are highly discouraged. But from the refugees' point of view, it is the Christians helping them.

This has been the first time the Hindu community as a whole has had a seriously disadvantaged group of its own in need of help. Swami Svatmavidyananda of Arsha Vijnana Gurukulam, Georgia, a speaker at the Priests' Conference, explained just how critical this help is: "I've spoken with a number of Bhutanese refugees and I know from first-hand information that they were told there were no Hindus in the United States, no temples and no places of worship and that they had no choice but to become Christians if they wanted to continue receiving help."

In the US, the Indian community is predominantly professionals, with relatively high income and a notably low crime rate. Canada has accepted a far wider range of immigrants, and some families at the low end of the economic scale have encountered problems. A few Canadian temples, such as the Ram Temple in Mississauga, have worked with the police to help troubled youth.

Treatment of Priests

Every temple has a program for training its new priest immigrants in how to function and navigate Western culture, though there are a few that provide little help in an effort to keep a tight control on them. Such temples usually have their priests stay in the US for two or three years only, hoping the men never achieve personal independence.

Priests are treated with respect at most temples. Programs to learn English are a priority. Another goal is seeing that they get a driver's license, allowing them to make their way to home visits, which are frequent and monetarily rewarding. Most are given time off to visit India. But we heard nothing of sabbatical leaves of six months or a year, as may be provided to clergy of other faiths.

Yegnasubramaniam of New Jersey commented on the issue of low income. "Some priests have a kind of complex that they are not treated on par with the mainstream people of the community. Many of their children, now settled in the US, marry into to other communities, either inter-caste or to a different Indian state, such as a South Indian marrying a Punjabi. This has become common even among traditional priests." Yegnasubramaniam said that, not surprisingly, few children of US priests want to enter the priesthood themselves. He told of a priest who cannot find a husband for his well-educated daughter, even though she has a good job.

Toronto's Ram Temple launched a program two years ago to train young men and women who want to be priests in the Caribbean tradition. Pundit Sharma explained, "We're trying to develop them to the point where they see the Hindu priesthood within a North American context as a reasonably well-paid profession that they would want to join." Some may go to India for training. In practice, however, there is no working pattern for priests' children in the West to become priests. For the foreseeable future, the temples must continue to rely on bringing priests from India.

What About Funerals?

One of the first events a new temple must learn to handle is a death in the community. The practical issues include finding a crematorium that will allow Hindu rites. It's a major theological issue that in India temple priests do not perform funerals, nor the subsequent sraddha ceremonies nine days and then one year later. A separate caste of priests performs these functions. In the West, however, most temples--including Toronto's Ram Mandir, the Texas Hindu Worship Society, the Dallas/Fort Worth Hindu Temple and the Ganesha Temple in Nashville, Tennessee--require all their priests to learn the rites and perform funerals as a condition of service, regardless of their particular tradition. [See Dr. Sabharatham's explanation from a scriptural perspective on page 17.]

Dr. Yegnasubramaniam spoke of his experience at the Sri Venkateswara Temple and Community Center in New Jersey: "The temple supplied a priest for the funeral. Once done, the priest cannot enter the temple that day. The same rule applies when they conduct the yearly shraddha ceremony."

Some temples do adhere to the Agamic tradition in this regard. A trustee of the Shiva Vishnu Temple of Melbourne wrote, "The full-time priests employed by the temple are brahmins and are forbidden to do the funeral rites." Dr. Subramaniam of the Shiva Vishnu Temple in Maryland told us that initially they had only two priests. When one of them did a funeral, he had to perform purification rituals before once again doing puja. Now the temple has a dozen priests, including some whose tradition includes funerals, so their Agamic priests--Saiva and Vaishnava alike--are excused from that function.

Dr. Doobay of the Vishnu Mandir in Toronto said his temple has a priest from North

India who does funerals. "Our priests from South India do not. The Agama priests are not supposed to do funerals." Dr. Doobay has also tried--unsuccessfully, so far--to get legal authorization for an area where a proper cremation could be held outside, with a pyre to walk around as described in scripture. In England recently, a similar effort successfully established that a law thought to forbid outdoor cremation actually did not, if the cremation was held in an enclosure, which could be open to the sky. However, no one has yet set up such a facility there.

Every temple we surveyed had a system for dealing with the funeral itself. Generally a volunteer within the group, acquainted with the local funeral homes, advises the family on having a cremation done in a Hindu manner. Many cities also have staff who assist regional groups (e.g., Gujarati or Tamil) with funerals. Several temples have identified bodies of water where ashes may be legally deposited, as required by Hindu tradition.

Congregational Worship

In discussing the evolving function of Hindu temples in the West, two quite distinctive types must be considered: those modelled upon temples in India (the majority) and those set up by Hindu immigrants from the countries of the 19th-century Indian diaspora, such as Fiji, Trinidad and Guyana.

The indentured laborers who went to those countries did so with few resources and no connection back to India. The work camps they lived in had a meeting hall, which they utilized as their temple, setting whatever Deity murti they possessed in the front. There were priests among those who came, and they did their best to continue the traditions--not only in leading the worship, but also teaching.

Adapting to life in the work camps, these groups made their modest temple the center of the community--a place of mutual support as well as worship. The result was a temple that functions much like a Christian church, complete with Sunday lecture and communal worship.

Most temples we interviewed have occasional visiting lecturers. The Hindu temple of Minnesota has a weekly 10:30 Sunday lecture by Trinidad-born devotee Dr. Anant Rambhachan of St. Olaf College, by temple president Dr. Sane or by a guest speaker. The lecture is given in a hall downstairs, then everyone goes upstairs for

arati at noon.

Dr. Rambhachan explained, "If you go to a Caribbean temple in the United States or Canada you'll find happening on a Sunday morning a structured, congregational form of worship with puja, bhajan, kirtan and also what is called pravachan--some teaching, for which the priest is also responsible. I know many people from India who go to these temples and find something very meaningful in the more structured mode of worship, which also speaks to their children." It remains to be seen if many of the temples built by immigrants from India will adopt the congregational model, which, it must be noted, requires a central, charismatic leader.

Conclusion

Managers and priests in the West are having to chart their own courses. There are no on-line tutorials or experts back in India to reach out to. But it's working. Hinduism is thriving here. Each year more temples are built, while the existing ones expand--both physically and in the services they offer the community. The experiences shared here are offered in hopes they will help inform the development of others, as the Hindu presence in the West continues to evolve. P!pi

Voices: Should Hindu Temples Follow the Caribbean Model?

Pandit Roopnauth Sharma, born in a priestly family in Guyana in 1952, now a Canadian citizen, is founder of the Shri Ram Mandir of Mississauga, just west of Toronto.

Hindus in the west have come not only directly from India but via diverse parts of the globe. Colonialism opened the doorway to the New World for the Hindu from India to transfer the ancient traditions of Hinduism to far corners of the world. Once this occurred, there started a gradual but unintentional reshaping of the basic functionality of the Hindu temple, different from that which existed in India, an evolution which continues to this day. These changes have been influenced by the geography, climatic conditions, availability of religious materials, governmental constraints, lack of temple elements, religion, culture, traditions and practices of each new country.

One key change has been the Sunday congregational worship. Hindus have traditionally worshipped daily in their temples, not as a congregation but as individuals showing their devotion and seeking blessings of the Deities. Temple functions were historically regulated by the Hindu lunar calendar rather than based on the days of the week.

Sunday worship may be new to most Hindus in the West. But it has long been the common practice in the Caribbean, particular in Guyana and Trinidad where there are significant Hindu populations. In these countries the national language is English, and all Hindus are fluent in English. Scriptures are recited in Sanskrit or Hindi, and then the message is delivered in English. The mandir has become not only a place of worship but the center of learning for the Hindu community.

This evolution seems to be the ideal solution for propagating and maintaining the Hindu way of life in the face of the threat of the Western lifestyle. Our Hindu institutions of worship must adapt some of the social, economic and business strategies of the West in order to sustain a rational approach to a meaningful and fulfilling life here.

Significant innovations that have already been made in some temples include the introduction of family counseling, immigrant settlement, career planning, youth forums, interfaith dialogues, day school for junior and senior kindergartens, senior homes, senior social support services, senior recreational activities, community services, spiritual care and consultation services to government institutions such as correctional services and youth detention centers. These innovations should be fostered vigorously. The temple must become an institution of learning, a social support entity to all of its congregation and a representative of the community on matters relating to Hindus to all levels of government and other agencies.

There is also a great need to reinvent the approach of delivering the message of Hinduism to the masses. The traditional method of puja, satsang, katha and other forms of religious gatherings needs to adapt and fully utilize current communication technologies. All pandits must strive to be competent in English and understand the Western way of thinking. They must also be encouraged to develop their presentation skills, as these are key tools in teaching and motivating the congregation. They should explain the significance of the ritual in a language understood by all in attendance. This gives credibility to the rituals and encourages the new generation.

Hindu temple leaders and community members must accept that we must change our approach in disseminating the tenets, philosophy and practices of our great religion. Otherwise, we risk the loss of our younger generation and the demise of the Hindu community as we know it today.