DHARMA DOWN UNDER
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Archaeologists speculate that the Aborigines sailed by outrigger from Southeast Asia to Australia 40,000 years ago. The first Hindus came in the 1830's, on ships from Bengal as cheap labor for the plantations of New South Wales. More dribbled in over the decades, but they left no lasting record or artifact of their Hinduness, other than a preference for cremation. In contrast, in the 1850's a large wave of Chinese rolled in to seek their fortunes in Australia's gold rush. An old pen-and-ink sketch by a Britisher depicts a Taoist temple in the heart of the mining city Bendigo.

By 1900 there were 4,000 Indians in Australia, at least 1,000 practicing their Hindu faith from the old motherland. But by this time - as with the hundreds of thousands of Hindus that migrated out of India in the great laborer diaspora of the 1800's - they were as Australian as the sun-burned sheep ranchers of the out stations.

By the 1970's the country's racially filtering immigration laws became obsolete and the Hindu population jumped drastically. It is now estimated to be 23-25,000. A similar number live in the neighboring islands of New Zealand.

In his recently published book Hinduism in Australia, Dr. Purusottama Bilimoria concludes that among Australian Hindus those from outside - in particular form Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Fiji and Mauritius - are more likely to retain a strong affinity with their religious traditions. He credits Sri Lankan Tamils as being influential in the formation of the various Hindu communities which have sprung into existence throughout Australia.

A large number of yogi masters and swamis have rooted themselves in the continent's soil. Their audience was not the Hindus, nut non-Hindu seekers

interested in hatha yoga, meditation and maybe a smattering of Hindu philosophy. The Hare Krishnas danced in the streets of Sydney early on. Swami Satyananda of the famous Bihar School of Yoga experienced a gold rush of success here. And Australia was the focus of world attention in 1978 with the Ananda Mara sect's attempted assassination of Australian government officials. The Vedanta Society of New South Wales and Siddha Yoga Foundation have robust followings.

Professor Bilimoria tracked the evolution of temple construction in Australia. There are at lest five temples built or in development stages, scattered across the southern half of the nation. Bilimoria says the first Hindu shrine was a church-converted temple for the Sri Mandir Society in 1974. Other temple facilities (including the Sri Venkateswara Temple pictured above) are run by the Sri Venkateswara Temple Association, Hindu Religion and Mandir Association, Hindu Society of Victoria, Hindu temple Association of Western Australia, Hindu Satsang Mandal, and the Hindu Society of South Australia.

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