

## [Toronto Temples Serve Teeming Hindu Population](#)

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# Toronto Temples Serve Teeming Hindu Population

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## One Temple's Dress Code Starts a Trend - And a Controversy

It is the Canadian version of Superman's Metropolis. Known as "T-O" to those familiar with it, Toronto epitomizes economic boom, only recently levelling off. If you live here, amidst the hustle-bustle, the speed, you love it. After all, for many, it is the chance of a lifetime. But Canadians outside of the southern Ontario "jungle" readily admit - even actively display - their disdain for the place. Who needs 6 million greedy, hyperactive people?

But within all this hype, culture abounds - everywhere. It's the shining light of Canada's "cultural mosaic" policy to immigration and to all the people of ethnicity. There is Little Greece. Little India, Chinatown, and 20 or more other "little someplace-or-other" sections of town.

The latest is Mini-Jaffna, where beneath the Tamil sign on the door, you can purchase stringhopper makers, or a rice-and-curry for \$4, a bargain. Mini-Jaffna is a direct result of the troubles in Sri Lanka. Some 40,000 Jaffna Tamils, of which about 30,000 are young single males, have in the last 3 years learned to call Toronto home.

How many Hindus live in Toronto? Good question, because nobody knows. The census only records country of origin, not religion. The answer is somewhere between 100 and 300 thousand, depending on who is answering. To be sure - a lot. Second only to London, United Kingdom, probably, outside of the East. Toronto's

Little India, which is three blocks of Gerrard Street hops on a weekend evening. The scents, the clothing, the aggressive honking of horns in unsuccessful attempts to clear the jaywalkers, gives one déjà vu of Bombay or Madras.

The largest group of Hindus here hail from Guyana, having come some 20 years back. Others, besides the Sri Lankans, come from Trinidad, Jamaica, India, East Africa and elsewhere, providing a general mix of sects, languages and Indian geographical differences.

So are these people committed to Western materialism, the get-ahead syndrome, or is there spirituality here amidst all this? Yes, indeed, spirituality cannot be run away from. Somebody or some group, desperate for a heart-felt closeness to God and Gods, decides to build a temple, buy property, or rent an archaic warehouse, just for a home for the Gods, where a moment's peace can be found. At least five temples are open daily; at least another five, owned by the devotees or association, are open once a week. Then who knows how many - probably another 20 groups - gather in a school gym, a home basement, or a rented warehouse to commune with divinity within, or to congregate in expressive bhakti.

## Vishnu Mandir

Vishnu Mandir is the second biggest in buildings (next to the Ganesh Mandir), but boasts the most numerous congregation and longest mailing list of Hindus anywhere in Canada. This place looks like a temple as you approach, easily recognized by the distinguished North India look. An exquisite statue of a walking Gandhi greets the visitor.

This temple is breaking new ground in being the first in North America to insist on a minimum standard of dress for worshippers - basically no shorts or jeans for men or women. Those improperly attired are offered a dhoti or sari to put on. Other temples are beginning to consider such dress codes [see sidebar], as in India it has always been traditional to bathe and don fresh clothes before coming to worship.

Inside, the entire altar dominates the end of a hall that can easily accommodate

2,000 devotees. Here also is construction, for the Vishnu temple is undergoing a \$1,000,000 renovation of priests' quarters, classrooms and a complete refurbished basement to include a banquet facility and library, besides expansion of the main temple area to make room for more devotees.

Dr. Bhudendra Doobey, the temple's dynamic Guyana-born president reminisced the temple's humble beginnings. "It started in 1981 at a very small house in Toronto. At that time we were just able to muster the down payment of \$50,000 to put down on the property. Our congregation on Sundays used to be about 150 people. We had no murthis of the gods, we used to use pictures only.

"We could barely get enough money to pay the running cost of the temple. Nevertheless we survived, and on the first Maha Shivaratri we had over 300 people. Dalmia Cement Company in India gave us our first murthi, that of Goddess Durga. The Divine Mother came to our temple in Oct 1982 - still we were just managing to muster enough money to pay our monthly payments. We had no priest. We used to go to the temple on Friday nights and do mother worship in whatever way we can."

The temple is open daily now, with the two resident priests, ready and willing to perform any rites one wishes for whatever purpose is at hand; but the main time here is on Sunday morning, beginning at 10:00 AM. Dr. Doobay, transforms himself into "Punditji" Sunday mornings, performing this dharma with admirable evangelistic zeal, spurring the devotees onward to truly accept God into their hearts through prayer.

Dr. Doobay told HINDUISM TODAY, "My aspect is to make sure everyone takes part, congregational worship in its true sense. Our temple is unique in the sense that you have the Vedic chanting from the South and the rituals of the North blending with the congregational worship picked up from the West. In the West Indies, where my foreparents went 150 years ago as indentured servants, they were not allowed to worship very easily. The Christians used to go to church on Sunday. So when the time came my foreparents were free, they decided they too must have a Sunday worship. So when I came to Canada, I started Sunday worship myself. All the other Hindu temples in Canada would worship in evening from 4:00 P.M. to 6:00 P.M. People just came for prasadam and to give an offering; there was no formal worship. I started from 10:00 A.M. to 12:00 noon. Now most temples are doing that."

Last year at Deepavali, Vishnu Mandir drew 10,000 people, causing unprecedented parking problems, forcing the temple to include a paved marked parking lot in its renovations as well as encouraging devotees to choose one of four main services on that day, to spread out the crowd.

## Ganesh Mandir

This is the richest, the most elaborate, and by far, the largest temple in Toronto. Locally called Ganesh Mandir, it is located at 10545 Bayview Ave., about 20 miles from downtown Toronto. As yet, it doesn't look like much; the worshippers must watch for the road-side sign. Later, when the proposed 82-foot rajagopurams are completed, it will be easily recognized from a distance.

"Ganesh Mandir" is a misnomer. The temple was started in 1984, with the installation of Lord Ganesh in a temporary sanctum/hall. The original name stuck. But in reality this is a Muruga/Balaji temple in a South Indian style. Dravidian architecture. The "two temples in one" concept with two main sanctum sanctorums is not found in a traditional design, but is found in the West, where Vaishnavas and Saivas worship side by side. The temple is a huge warehouse - a strong steel structure which is the largest temple to date in North America - with a total worshipping area of over 15,000 sq. ft.,

Inside there are 14 individual altars. The moolasthanas (individual stone sanctums), for Muruga and Balaji are as yet incomplete, being crafted in India. Each weighs in at 420 tons of granite, and is to be shipped and installed in two or three year's time, rising right through the roof to a height of 61 feet. The Muruga murthy here is the largest one carved this century, standing at 8 feet - the priest has to stretch and climb to perform abhishekam. It's all truly quite impressive.

There are five full-time priests. There is a steady round of pujas, procession and the like. Almost everyone stops at the office and purchases the \$5.00 archana ticket on the way in. On a regular Friday night, 500 to 1000 devotees come and go, each on their own schedule, for there is no congregational worship here. During festivals, the crowd swells to four or five thousand. Most of the devotees are Sri Lankan, and the fact this place exists at all is due to their numbers and support.

The other notable part of this temple is the Lord Nataraja "golden" temple. The entire roof is gold plated, as will be all the murthis, and art-work inside the altar.

### Hindu Prarthana Samaj

This is Toronto's first, and hence oldest temple. Set in the middle of an older high income neighborhood bordering on beautiful High Park, this house-become-temple looks small - until you get inside. Capable of accommodating 500 devotees, with one fulltime priest, it also is open daily. The Hindu Prarthana temple is located close to downtown and has its main function every Sunday evening between 6 and 8, which sets it apart from the more common Sunday morning style.

### Hindu Sabha Temple

Located in Bramalea, 20 miles northwest, this is yet another house-become-temple. Its two full-time priests do a lot of home pujas, but one always remains at the temple. Children's' classes in religion and language are held each Saturday. Recently purchased property has the Hindu Sabha Temple planning on selling the current property and building their own new temple.

### Scarborough and Others

The aforementioned four temples plus the ISKCON temple shown above are open daily. Other notable weekly temples are the Hindu Society of Scarborough, whose regular Sunday crowd of 200 meet in a warehouse for now, the Kalibari of the Bengali group, which is located in an rural house about 30 miles northwest, the Visvanath Mandir on Jane Street where 200 more devotees meet each Sunday, and the Swaminarayan Hindu Mission near the airport.

Many more small but dedicated satsang groups such as Pandit Isri Maraj's temple-in-your-basement group also meet. One can find whatever he wishes under the vast umbrella of Hinduism. With so many temples now, many more in planning

or under construction, the future looks blessed for Toronto Hindus.

## The Importance of Hindu Dress

Any suggestion of imposed dress guidelines for our western Hindu temples results in immediate discussion - to most experience running 80% in favor of a code and 20% against. No one disputes that tradition calls for clean and proper dress. Swami Harshananda in his book, *All About Hindu Temples*, explains the tradition. "When we want to meet our superiors or persons highly placed in life, we observe certain etiquette, norms and decorum. Taking bath, wearing freshly washed clothes is a must before visiting the temple."

Some raise the question of the origin of tailored clothing in India, pointing out that the ancient texts speak only of wrapped whole cloth such as the present day dhoti, and, in elaborated form, the sari. Stitched clothing, a product of colder climates, was present in India long before the Muslim invasions. In the exhaustive study, *Indian Costume*, author G.S. Ghurye, states, "The period of Muslim domination seems to have only stabilized the already evolved costumes and spread some of the regional varieties much further than their original home." Ghurye points out that a picture of Buddha as Prince Siddhartha in the Ajanta frescoes of about 440CE - long before Islam was propounded - show him wearing "'cudidara pyjama' and the prototype of what has been known for more than a generation as the 'Nehru shirt,'" states Ghurye.

What is the proper dress of a Hindu today? Within India it is any of the many regional variations; outside of India necessarily the clothing must be suitable for both the climate and acceptable attire for the majority communities. Hindus have settled on the sari and Punjabi (also known as salwar kameez or surithar) for women and the kurta and loose trousers or pyjamas for men. Dhoties for men are excellent for the temple, though only priests are required to wear them.

And the drawback of wearing western clothes? Here's the myopic, racist and probably accurate prediction of westerner Lawrence Langner in his book. *The Importance of Wearing Clothes*: "The wearing of western clothes is already beginning to lead to the emancipation of women in Africa and Asia, as well as in a modification of the traditional religions which make for unsanitary living and a lack

of interest in science and the material world. When these other races wear western clothes, they acquire western ideas along with them. These in turn set a pattern for many advantageous improvements in living." Or, a Hindu might more rightly conclude, "a pattern for destruction of one's cultural and religious heritage."

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