

## CHAPTER THREE

# AMERICAN HINDUS: THE GANGES AND THE MISSISSIPPI



*E* *pluribus unum*, “From Many, One,” could easily come from the ancient Rig Veda, with its affirmation: “Truth is One. People call it by many names.” To be honest, the Vedas take the *unum* a giant step further. This affirmation of oneness is not sociological or political but theological; it is an affirmation about the very nature of ultimate reality. God or Truth or Ultimate Reality is one, though people speak of that One in many ways and try to realize it in their lives through many paths. On the face of it, Hindu immigrants would seem natural participants in the American project. Unity in diversity is a keynote of Hindu civilization: so many paths, so many gods, so many sects, and yet the deeply held affirmation of one common humanity animated by the one reality called Brahman, roughly translated as Truth, Ultimate Reality, or even God

Throughout our history, the United States has been dominated by the influence of Christianity—strongly monotheistic, with many Christian voices articulating an exclusivist view of “the way, the truth, and the life.” At the same time, our Constitution has enabled a plurality of ways to flourish because of its strong stand for freedom of conscience. Thus, the positive civic view of pluralism implicit in the freedom of religion clauses of the Constitution clashes directly with the negative religious views of pluralism held by some conservative Christians. Hindus bring something unique to America—a theology of religious pluralism. Not only do they participate in the civic pluralism, which guarantees their right to freedom of religion, they also offer a worldview based on religious pluralism. It is a worldview in which the manyness of religious

ways, paths, and understandings of God are not conflicting but consonant. They sound out the cosmic mysteries together, like the symphony of civilization imagined by pluralist sociologist Horace Kallen. Perhaps more appropriately, they glide like the intricate movements of an Indian raga, disciplined by scale and rhythm but created ever anew at each performance by the inspired innovation of each artist.

This consonance also has its dissonance. Hindu understandings of the Divine may seem distant to Americans of Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or even secular backgrounds, as they did to me when I first went to India as a young student. I am acutely aware of this as I meet people here in the U.S. who are encountering the panoply of Hindu gods for the first time and trying to comprehend it.

Understanding the manyness of the Divine is a good place to begin in our discussion of the Hindu tradition in America. In the fall of 1997 I received a call from a former student who was the pastor of a church in the town of Woburn, north of Boston. She was an enthusiastic member of the Woburn Clergy Association, and when a Hindu community bought the old Unitarian Church and she began to see worshipers in saris going in and out, she inquired whether this new community might be invited to join the Woburn Clergy Association. The association sponsors cooperative work like the Domestic Violence Task Force and community events like the interfaith Martin Luther King Day observance and the annual Thanksgiving service. Most members of the association were delighted, but one pastor was vehemently opposed. He wrote a lengthy letter to the association:

I believe that the inclusion of the Hindu Community into the Clergy Association is making either an explicit or implicit statement to the community at large that other religions are valid and that Jesus is not unique but one of many! Is that what the association wants to purport to the community? And what exactly are we going to teach and preach with the Hindu Center in the Association? Will there be any room for a message about Jesus Christ crucified or will that view be "excluded" and Jesus now relegated to only one of 66,000 Hindu Gods?

Most of us who have had some contact with Christianity in America recognize the concern of this pastor. How do Christians reconcile claims to the uniqueness of Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life" with appreciation of other ways of faith, especially a Hindu faith that expressly

underlines the multiplicity of ways? The Woburn pastor vastly underestimated the problem, however. Hindus usually say there are 330 million gods, not 66,000. But the Hindu claim is not really about numbers anyway; 330 million is obviously not a numerical god count but a gesture in the direction of infinity. There are as many manifestations of divine presence as we have eyes to see. Even so, the particular gods and the divine images through which they are worshiped confront many Americans with religious ways we simply do not understand. One nation under many gods sticks in the throat—for both Hindus and Christians. We need to come closer, ask questions, and listen carefully.

If you were to come with me to visit two typical American Hindu temples, as I did on a Saturday in late February of 1999, we could observe clearly and vividly the manyness of Hindu visions of the divine that underlies this one-and-many worldview. Those of you not familiar with Hindu worlds of image and ritual would probably experience both the dissonance and the consonance.

In Sunnyvale, California, the Hindu Temple and Cultural Society occupies a former warehouse on Persian Road, which runs parallel to the freeway. I stop first at the Indian market in the mini-mall next door, stocked with bags of basmati rice, spices, and condiments and thousands of CDs and audiotapes organized by language—Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati. I am looking for a tape of the “Hymn to the Goddess,” the Sanskrit *Devi Mahatmya*—and there are many to choose from, along with devotional songs, *bhajans*, from every region of India and dedicated to every god. Next door is the temple, which repeats this eclecticism in a sacred key. The building itself is a graceless single-story building with no architectural distinction whatsoever. From the small palm-lined parking lot, swinging glass doors lead into a huge carpeted hall with flat fluorescent ceiling lights. I take off my shoes at the door and walk across the room toward the altars, which host one of the most dazzling arrays of metal and stone images and polychrome posters I have seen anywhere. I press my palms together in front of my chest, a *namaste*, a gesture of greeting and respect. I catch the eye of the *pujari* who attends the deities on the altar and assists worshipers in their *puja* and *namaste* to him as well. Standing right here in Sunnyvale is a good place to introduce ourselves to the Hindu gods.

At the center is a foot-high metal image of Ganesha, the rotund elephant-headed Lord of Beginnings and Remover of Obstacles, worshiped at the outset of every ritual. He is wreathed with a dozen flower garlands. In front of him is a Shiva *linga*, the cylindrical shaft that repre-

sents in abstract form the supreme presence of Shiva, who is beyond all faces and forms. According to Shaiva theology, this *linga* is a tiny representation of the shaft of sheer light that rose from the depths of the sea and pierced the highest heavens as the gods were arguing about which of them was supreme. Just to the right, in a small shrine with interior mirrors, is the Baby Krishna, a small brass image dressed in bright blue clothing and reflected in all directions into infinity. In the second row of altar images, Krishna also appears as the saucer-eyed Jagannatha special to the state of Orissa and as the black-faced and wide-eyed Shrinath-ji from Rajasthan. To the left of Ganesha stands Vishnu, here under the name of Shri Venkateswara Balaji, whose hilltop temple in South India is one of the most popular pilgrimage places in India. Behind this whole array are polychrome poster pictures: prominent teachers like Guru Nanak and Satya Sai Baba; the image of Lord Rama, bow in hand, with his brother Lakshmana and his wife Sita, the devoted monkey Hanuman kneeling before them. Behind them all is a huge Hanuman somehow overseeing the whole altar display. A second altar just to the right bears the various forms of the divine Goddess. Vaishno Devi, a hilltop goddess from Jammu in Kashmir who attracts pilgrims from all over North India, is in the center, riding her tiger and bearing weapons in her many arms. Around her are more benign images, like the gracious Sarasvati, and fearsome images, like the black dancing Kali garlanded with a necklace of skulls. If you weren't a Hindu, and perhaps even if you were, you would want a guide through the welter of deities. On these crowded and colorful altars appears some image large or small for every Hindu from every region and sectarian movement.

This multitude of deities is the conservative Woburn minister's worst nightmare. I think about him and the distinctive nature of America's encounter with Hinduism on my forty-minute drive west to the Shiva-Vishnu temple in Livermore. How does one explain all this to people encountering it for the first time? Why so many gods? Why the images? These certainly are the questions of anyone reared in the monotheistic traditions of the West. Not only the many gods, but the prolific imaging of the divine is a problem. The taboo against the "graven image" runs deep in our consciousness, and most people don't take the time to study Hinduism and ask just what it all means. My own metaphor has always been the kaleidoscope, with its multitude of tiny parts and pieces, colors and forms, the whole glittering altar at Sunnyvale. And yet, with a twist of the wrist, all these pieces fall into a different pattern; there

are many centers and many intricate displays of the periphery. As if this weren't enough, each of the great gods repeats its own version of the One and the many. Each has many names; each has many forms; and each form may have many arms, even many heads and many faces. The well-known image of the dancing Shiva has at least four arms: one hand holding the drum of creation, another bearing the fire of destruction, another raised in a gesture meaning "fear not," and another pointing toward his gracefully raised foot, inviting the devotee to take refuge in his mercy.

Nearing Livermore, I pull off Interstate 580 onto North Vasco Road, I am in the midst of a brand new suburban development, its large houses and condominiums all variations on a white, beige, gray, sand, buff theme. It does not seem a likely place for a South Indian Hindu temple. I am convinced I must be in the wrong neighborhood, until I actually reach the wrought iron gates. I am surprised to see it there, a fine brick temple set back from the road, with an ornately decorated white tower over the central doorway and two elegant spires to either side. The whole building is trimmed with decorative cement castings. A well-kept long green lawn stretches toward the temple, with plenty of parking on either side. The lot is full on a Saturday afternoon with perhaps sixty or seventy cars.

Though I have been visiting American Hindu temples for nearly ten years now, I am still amazed at the very existence of a splendid temple like this one right in the midst of a markedly Walmart-suburban neighborhood. I remove my shoes at an outdoor shoe rack, overflowing this sunny Saturday afternoon with Reeboks and sandals. It is California, and I walk barefoot toward the door. Entering the spacious temple room, I find that a twist of the kaleidoscope has brought me to a very different space than that of the temple I left an hour ago in Sunnyvale. Here, as in so many of the new American temples, the various deities are accommodated not on a single altar, but each in its own chamber—on the right the shrines of Vishnu and his entourage and on the left those of Shiva. Each shrine is also labeled, which makes navigation easier, perhaps deceptively so: "Ganesha, Remover of Obstacles, Son of Shiva," "Shiva, Destroyer of Evils, Lord of Music and Dance," "Vishnu, The Supreme Protector," and "Sreedevi (Lakshmi), Goddess of Wealth, Wife of Lord Vishnu." The temple has made an effort to be user-friendly—for visitors who may know nothing of the Hindu tradition, for children who are growing up in the tradition, and even for their parents.

In India, a temple called "Shiva-Vishnu" would be unusual, to say the least. Every temple has an array of images but usually centered on a single

central deity. Many American Hindu temples have chosen that pattern too, like the grand temple in the Penn Hills of Pittsburgh, dedicated to Vishnu under the name Sri Venkateswara. The other deities are there, but Vishnu occupies the central sanctuary. In Flint, Michigan, Shiva has his place at the center in the Kashi Vishvanatha Temple, named for Shiva as he appears in the sacred city of Banaras in India. In Houston, it is the Goddess Meenakshi who is honored at the center. But here in the Bay Area, the growing and diverse Hindu community has improvised creatively on the notes and rhythms of Hinduism and has chosen a dual center: worshipping both Shiva and Vishnu equally under one roof and dedicating the temple to both. Each of these great and complex deities, Shiva and Vishnu, is understood to be supreme, each a visible form of the Ultimate Reality whose names are many. The eclecticism here is also architectural. The shrine of Shiva and the spire that rises above it are designed in the beehive Kalinga style of the great Bhubanesvar Temple in Orissa in eastern India, while the shrine of Vishnu and its spire duplicate the Chola style of the Tirupati Temple in southern India.

As I think about the *pluribus* of gods here, I am also struck by the multiplicity of the temple's ritual life. This afternoon a range of religious rituals are being held concurrently, for Hindu temple life is not usually congregational in form. Families come and go. A small group of worshipers gathers near the door of the Ganesha shrine watching reverently as the priest lifts a six-wick oil lamp holder to illumine the face of the deity. He turns and comes out of the inner sanctum, offering the lamp to all of us. I too pass my fingertips through it, touching them to my forehead and eyes, appropriating the blessing of the Lord's light. A loudspeaker announcement informs us that a *puja* for Lord Vishnu is about to begin across the temple hall, and some of the worshipers reassemble there. The priest begins to sing the "Thousand Names of Vishnu" as he begins the *puja*. However, my attention is diverted by a family seated on the floor in front of Krishna's shrine a few feet away. The young parents are having their newborn baby named and blessed. Seeing my interest, they beckon me, a complete stranger, to sit down with them. They introduce themselves as Venkat and Radhika, and their baby is named Vikas. They have come from their home in Castro Valley, a few miles to the west, for the formal naming ceremony. Under the guidance of one of the staff priests, Venkat traces his own name, the name of his father, and the name of his little son in a large round stainless steel plate of rice grains. The couple both prostrate toward Lord Krishna, and then they guide the little



baby in his first full prostration. All of us gathered round are given a few grains of rice to shower on little Vikas, adding our own blessings to the occasion. Finally, as I leave the temple, a shiny black Toyota Corolla is parked at the front door for what I discover is a new-car blessing, a *vahana puja*. Young men in snappy khakis stand in casual reverence while the temple priest sprinkles the vehicle with water sanctified by contact with the deity.

Hindus come by their pluralism naturally. The very environment of worship reinforces it—whether in the plain surroundings of Sunnyvale or the finely made new temple of Livermore. Whatever one's conception of God, whatever one's sect or perspective, one worships in the context of many others. Worship does not begin at an appointed hour, move through a program of liturgies and song, and then conclude. Rather, worship is multi-form and simultaneous. One never forgets that there are divergent ways of worship, divergent understandings of the divine presence. This is a world-view that seems ready-made for America: one understanding of God, one ritual form or path, does not preclude the flourishing of others right next door. The Puritans of the old Massachusetts Bay Colony would not have liked it, but I suspect that Roger Williams with his vision of "soul liberty" might have managed an appreciative response, at least with a little coaching.

The language of the One Reality and the many paths is comfortably abstract for most Americans, but when their new Hindu neighbors introduce them to Shiva, Vishnu, or Ganesha, they might well find these gods strange, off-putting, even frightening. I suspect that many of the neighbors in this new suburban development find the forms of worship here at the Shiva-Vishnu temple alien. The words *polytheism* and *idol worship* might come to mind as they try to grasp the meaning of these divine images of granite and bell metal, clothed now in bright swatches of saris and dhotis, honored with incense, flowers, bells, sweets, bananas, and camphor-scented water. Any temple trustee, any priest, any worshiper, indeed the young couple from Castro Valley, could eagerly explain to them the oneness of the Divine and the vivid variety of what they call "names and forms" in which the Divine is manifest. If the people next door spent some time here with these new Hindu neighbors, they would surely begin to glimpse the meanings of these ways of worship, perhaps even appreciate them, perhaps even gain deeper insight into their own understandings of the One they call God. It would be time well spent.

The past thirty years in America have seen the rise of temple-based Hinduism in the United States. This is new for America. Makeshift temples like the one in Sunnyvale abound. A cavernous former warehouse in

Woodside, Queens, is the Divya Dham temple, a veritable universe of Hindu gods and shrines. A former church at the corner of Polk and Pine in Minneapolis houses the Hindu community of the Twin Cities. Beyond these kinds of adaptive use, Hindus have initiated the building of brand-new temples, like the one in Livermore, as they have put down roots in the American landscape. The temple Hinduism of the new immigration has brought the Hindu gods permanently to America, beginning with the first full-scale Hindu temples dedicated in 1978. That year, on a hilltop outside Pittsburgh, the Sri Venkateswara temple for Lord Vishnu was consecrated; and in Flushing, Queens, a landmark temple to Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed remover of obstacles, was opened. So it began, and year after year since that time, Hindus have consecrated new temples all over the United States. As I often tell my students, there is no better place than America for studying Hindu rites of consecration, for in India most of the temples are old and were consecrated centuries ago, while in America all of the temples are new.

For Hindus, consecrating and installing images of the gods in these temples is no small matter. It requires a long-term commitment and a vision for the future. When these rites establish divine breath in a granite image and ritually open the eyes of the Divine, they provide more than green cards for the gods; they, in effect, make the them permanent residents of American cities. And so it is that Lord Rama resides in Chicago, Vishnu in Pittsburgh, the Goddess Meenakshi in Houston, and the Goddess Lakshmi in Boston. Since the arrival of these Hindu gods deeply challenges the assumptions of many Americans, concerned about polytheism and idolatry, we should have a closer look at how a Hindu community creates its temples and brings its gods to life.

#### BRINGING LAKSHMI TO LIFE IN NEW ENGLAND

I saw my first American-built Hindu temple in the suburbs of Boston, just off Route 135 where the Boston Marathon begins each April. Over the years, I had logged thousands of hours in temples all over India from the high Himalayas to the ocean shores of Tamil Nadu, but not until I pulled off Route 135 in suburban Ashland into the construction site of the Sri Lakshmi Temple in early 1990 did I actually see a temple being built from the ground up. I had already missed the ritual groundbreaking, which had included the rites of *bhumi puja*, the “worship of the earth.” Then the huge machinery of a Wellesley engineering firm had moved in



and begun digging and shoving tons of earth around. By May of 1990, a boxy cinderblock building formed the basic structure of the temple. It was capped with four white spires intricately ornamented with the images of the gods and their supernatural attendants.

The story of the Sri Lakshmi Temple is typical of many American Hindu communities. In the 1970s new Indian immigrants to Boston, most of them professionals who had come during their student years, took jobs and settled in New England. They all intended to return to India, eventually. Then they began to have children, and before long their children were in grade school. By now, these young families were putting down deeper roots in America and beginning to look toward a future here. They realized that their children would have no cultural or religious identity as Hindus at all unless they themselves began to do something about it. So in 1978 a group of Tamil families from South India, who had been meeting for holidays in one another's homes, incorporated as the New England Hindu Temple and began planning to build a temple. Each couple donated an auspicious \$101, and the project began to roll. For the next few years they worshiped in makeshift quarters—a Knights of Columbus Hall in Melrose and the Village Club in Needham. They brought glossy colored prints and small metal images of the deities. Ranjini Ramaswamy described the life of the nascent community. "We used to go there once a month on a Sunday morning, clean up the whole place, rearrange the chairs, arrange the deities on a table, and worship from about ten to two. Then we would eat together, clean up the place, and go." By 1981 the growing group had collected \$30,000 in donations—enough to buy a parcel of land set back from the road in suburban Ashland.

As the prospects for a temple became a reality, they first had to decide which deity to place in the sanctuary. Here they took a noncontroversial and practical approach. They selected the Goddess Lakshmi. She would be especially appropriate for New England's first temple because, they said, she is the Goddess of Fortune who has blessed them in America. Of all the forms of Shakti—the powerful energy of the Great Goddess—Lakshmi is a wholly auspicious form. She has nothing of the dark ambiguity of Kali or the fierce-weaponed Durga. Lakshmi is an aspect of the Goddess beloved of all Hindus. To her sides would be representatives of two families of Hindu devotion: Vishnu, in the popular form of Sri Venkateswara, and Ganesha, son of Shiva.

These Hindus were engineers and doctors, metallurgists and biochemists, not temple builders. In fact, many of them had not been

actively religious at all in India. Had they returned to Madras or Bangalore, they would never have become involved in the building or administration of a temple. But here in America their education as Hindus took on a new and practical form. They brought a traditional temple architect from India to survey the building site, to orient the temple, to draw its design according to ritual canons, and to sketch the sanctuaries and the divine images that would occupy them. Plans in hand, the community was faced with the challenge of explaining the proposed temple and its activity to the zoning board in the town of Framingham. "They knew nothing of Hinduism, nothing of what a Hindu temple in the neighborhood would be like or what it would mean. We had to explain it as best we could," said T. A. Venkataraman, the Boston Edison engineer who spearheaded the project. "Finally, I took some of them in my car and drove down to the Ganesha temple in New York, so they could see with their own eyes what we were up to." In the end, there was no resistance. The design of the ritual architects was translated into working drawings by the engineering firm, which excavated the foundation and constructed the large shell of concrete block. The artisans called *shilpis* came from India to live in the temple. Theirs was the task of pouring, casting, and installing all the ornamentation that would cover the temple spires and the several sancta of the temple within. On my second trip to the temple, I climbed up onto the roof with Venkataraman, known as Venky, who had volunteered hundreds of hours after work and on weekends to supervise the site. There I could see the *shilpis* at work on the spires, cementing the ornamental castings in place.

In May, the week of the consecration arrived. A great yellow-and-white-striped tent was pitched next to the temple to provide the ritual space for the consecration rites that would take place over the span of six days. Hundreds of Hindus gathered, morning and evening, as priests from India and a dozen American temples invoked the spiritual power of the Divine at each of seven fire-altars. Each sat cross-legged before one of the brick fire-altars, kindled the fires, chanted invocations, and invited the Divine presence. They poured oblations of clarified butter, grains, incense, honey, and spices into the flames, all to the ceaseless chanting of hymns from the Vedas, the very oldest hymnic record of India, preserved in memory alone for three thousand years. Before there were any temples at all in India, indeed before there were any images of the gods at all, these altars were the place of worship and praise.

Every day that week, I drove the twenty-five minutes from Cambridge to Ashland to see the unfolding sequence of rituals I had not witnessed in years of fieldwork in India. In this elaborate consecration process, the priests not only invoked the power of the Divine into the fires but also transferred it, through a stream of hymnic recitations, into hundreds of clay and metal water pots arrayed around fire-altars. These pots, each sponsored by a member of the temple community, contained the waters of the Ganges River in India, mingled with the waters of the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Colorado Rivers of America. At the end of the week, these waters would be poured lavishly on the temple towers and on the images of the gods within.

As the weekend approached, the activity at the temple reached a fever pitch. Volunteers were sweeping and cleaning the shrines inside the temple. They prepared the central shrine for the image of Lakshmi, the auspicious goddess of wealth and blessings. The shrine on the right would house the image of Vishnu and the left, Ganesha. The dark granite images of the gods, sculpted by sacred artists south of Madras, had been shipped to Boston in crates. For weeks they had stood in the construction site, unconsecrated but carefully and respectfully treated. Now, during this week of ceremonies, they were prepared and bathed. All of us, Hindus and visitors alike, were amused at the distinctive and ingenious arrangements for the ritual bathing: large, brand-new, plastic splashing pools, covered with Big Bird, the Cookie Monster, and other characters from *Sesame Street*. Lying in their pools, they were submerged sequentially in flower petals, in grains, in milk, and in water. Through it all, they were bathed in a constant stream of Sanskrit hymns and chants.

On Friday, a sparkling May morning, the eyes of the gods were opened. I stood in the sunshine outside the temple with a group of thirty or forty Hindus who had taken the morning off from work for this landmark event. Inside, in a corner of the temple sequestered behind office dividers, priests and ritual artisans were carving pupils on the eyes of the granite images, and the eyes of the Divine were ritually opened. The term *darshan* is central to Hindu worship. It means, literally, “seeing,” more specifically, the exchange of gaze between the human and Divine. We humans both see the Divine through the lens of this image and receive, in return, the blessed gaze of God. It is said that the first burst of sight released from the image is too powerful for any mortal to bear, so a mirror is placed before the image and the first gaze falls upon the mirror, reflecting back upon God. This morning, we were told that the mirrors

had been set up and that when we finally entered the temple, we should look at the Divine image first in the mirror.

As we chatted in the sunshine, waiting for the rituals inside to be completed, a large transport truck pulled up bearing the name of a dairy farm down the road. The farmer opened the rear, pulled down the ramp, and out came a golden brown cow whose name, we were told, was Darling. One of the priests and Ranjini, a member of the temple board, greeted Darling, garlanding her with a necklace of pink rosebuds. Darling would be the first living being to be seen by the gods. The dairy farmer, wearing overalls and a baseball cap, visibly intrigued by his role in these events, led Darling into the sanctuary, past the powerful gaze of the gods. When they emerged, the small crowd gathered at the temple door moved quickly toward Darling, touching her, circling her, garlanding her, pressing the auspicious red marks of kumkum on her forehead—all ways of honoring the cow, now blessed with the holy gaze of the gods, and appropriating those blessings for themselves. These Hindus would insist that cows are not worshiped in India, as some of their American neighbors might imagine, but they are indeed loved and honored as auspicious bearers of blessings. That morning everyone was delighted with Darling, including the astonished farmer who had never before seen her so bedecked.

The young girls of the temple were next after Darling in the pecking order of auspiciousness. About fifteen of them, dressed in their best outfits, had taken the morning off from school. They entered the sanctuary and after five minutes emerged again, excited and pleased, each bearing the *prasad*, the blessed gifts given them by the priest: a piece of silk that had wrapped one of the deities, some sweets and a banana that had been offered to the deities, and a Susan B. Anthony silver dollar. Priti, a twelve-year-old, told me that she was going to write about the event for her fifth-grade class in Lexington. As they posed for photographs, it was clear that all of these girls would long remember this day and their roles in opening this temple. Finally, the rest of us were permitted to go in. We filed past the images of the gods, taking care, as we had been told, to look first into the mirrors before looking directly at the deities. I had been in countless Hindu temples for *darshan*; I had even written a book about this form of worship in India and the importance of the exchange of gaze that takes place between the Divine and the worshiper. It is not just that we humans reach out with our eyes to touch the divine presence, but the Divine sees us as well. Here in the soft greenery of a New England May, the Divine beheld New England Hindus. It began to dawn on me what a

great threshold had been crossed. A lifelong Methodist, I found myself touching the feet of each of these images in reverence.

The Divine is fully present in these images but obviously is not limited to them. And just in case any one of us might be tempted to take the images too literally or narrowly, that same night eight grandmothers of the temple were also honored as embodiments of the Goddess Lakshmi. I arrived at the temple about eight in the evening to find the whole community gathered there for this special rite, Suvasini Puja. Eight of the most senior women of the temple were consecrated for this one night as Lakshmi. They were all women who had been active in the life of the temple and had the two qualifications of auspiciousness: they were mothers of children and wives of living husbands. They sat in a row, while the younger women of the temple community honored them by performing a *puja*. At some point in the long ritual, the whole battalion of Brahmin priests from all over the world entered the crowded hall and prostrated fully on the floor before these grandmothers, honoring the Goddess in these living women. My mind was filled with the strains of the great hymn to the Goddess:

*That Goddess who is present among all creatures as women,  
Praise to her, praise to her, praise to her again and again.*

The next night was Saturday, the night before the final consecration. The men of the temple joined in the task of moving the granite images of the gods into the three inner shrines of the temple and securing them in place. It was no small task. It required wedges, ramps, hoists, ropes, and a lot of muscle power. Early the next morning, the priests kindled their fires once again in the great tent next door and invoked the divine presence, now with the intention of imbuing these granite images with the symbolic breath of life. My hosts explained that the divine power was ritually transmitted from the fire-altars through silver threads, which ran from the tent into the temple and around the stone images. In this amazing week of rituals, the stone images from India had become, for the Hindu community, the bearers of the very life of the Divine. Bringing images to life in this way is no small commitment. From this moment on, the community must be sure there are priests in attendance so that worship can be offered every day of the week—morning, noon, and evening—whether other worshipers are there or not. On this Sunday morning, Lakshmi, Vishnu, and Ganesha became the permanent divine residents of suburban Boston.

The whole temple was also consecrated that Sunday morning. Perhaps three thousand New England Hindus attended as the cere-



monies came to a climax. They carried hundreds of round water pots out of the tent-sanctuary and around the new temple, circumambulating the sacred precincts of the gods. Priests, now hoarse with the chanting of thousands upon thousands of *mantras* and *stotras*, led the procession, bearing the largest and heaviest pots on their heads. They rode a hydraulic hoist up to the temple rooftop to pour the consecrated river waters of India and America over the ornate towers. All the rest of us stood below, cheering and stretching our hands heavenward to catch the blessings of the water sprinkled from above.

It is clear that for these Hindus of New England building a temple meant building a community too. As the process came to fruition that May, everyone participated—preparing lemon rice for thousands of visitors, stringing flower garlands, putting up twinkling lights, managing parking and shuttle buses, directing traffic, distributing lunch, sweeping and cleaning at the end of each day. By the time of the tower sprinkling at Sunday noon, the whole Hindu community had come together at New England's first temple. Building and consecrating a temple had created a new community. At the close of the day, my friend Venky surveyed the multitude of volunteers and said to me, "This is what I want to see. What is gratifying is to have the participation of all these people. What is wonderful is, now, to be able to stand aside while others do the work. This is real success."

A woman from Framingham summed up what must have been the emotions of many that day: "We have been living here for twenty years now and have been longing for a temple. This is a day of sheer happiness for us," she said. "As I drove home last night and in a few minutes came to downtown Framingham, I could scarcely believe that this had finally happened. I felt as if I had covered the distance between India and America in such a short time."

In the 1980s and 1990s, these rites, called *kumbhabhishekha*, literally, sprinkling (*abhishekha*) with the waters of the water pots (*kumbha*), have been repeated in dozens of new Hindu temples all over America. They have become the first great public rites of American Hindus as they claim a visible place in the American landscape—in Atlanta and Memphis, in Cleveland and St. Louis. In Boston, these rites reached out to the community. Members of the town council came to the consecration, as did the mayor, who was garlanded with a necklace of flowers and introduced to the Goddess Lakshmi. The local Framingham newspaper told the tale in its headline: "Goddess of Beauty and Abundance Radiates Shakti in Yankee New England."



During the next few years, the bare cinderblock of the temple would be ornamented and painted, an entry pavilion with skylights would be constructed, and a huge ornamented tower called the *rajgopuram*, the “royal gateway,” would be built over the entryway. The whole temple, painted a gleaming white, would become one of the architectural gems of the Boston area.

### THE “EASTING” OF OLD NEW ENGLAND

Less than ten miles from the Sri Lakshmi temple is the town of Concord, famous for the “rude bridge that arched the flood” where the first volley of the American Revolution was fired. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s home is a long stone’s throw from the bridge today, and it is here in the quiet of his study in the old house among the elms that we might look for some first roots of America’s fascination with Hinduism. Emerson met the Hindu tradition and its philosophies the same way I did as a college student—in Hindu texts. He was an undergraduate at Harvard when he was introduced to Hindu literature through his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. As early as the 1820s, Emerson began to write about India in his journals. His early entries expressed his astonished disapproval of the “godderly” and the “ostentatious ritual of India.”<sup>1</sup> He probably would have had a hard time with Sri Lakshmi and the many other deities at the Ashland temple. Of course, in those days he had no neighbors in Concord who were Hindus, as he surely would today, and he had no opportunity to visit a Hindu temple or hear how the Hindu faithful understand their many gods.

By the 1830s Emerson had a copy of the Bhagavad Gita, the “Song of God,” which revealed to him a more exalted view of Hinduism. He wrote, “I owed—my friend and I owed—a magnificent day to the Bhagavad Geeta. It was the first of books; it was as if an empire spake to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.”<sup>2</sup> In the Gita, Emerson glimpsed something of the breadth of the Hindu tradition. He learned, for example, that religious life can be lived in different ways according to our temperament. For the activist, there is the path of ethical works, or *karma*. For the contemplative and meditative soul, there is the path of wisdom, or *jnana*. And for those yearning to direct their love and emotion toward God, there is the path of *bhakti*, devotion. For Emerson, *bhakti*, even in the muted form found in the Song of God, might well have seemed too close

to the Christian evangelicalism rampant in the second Great Awakening of his day. He was more drawn to the path of ethical action, but he was attracted most of all to the path of philosophical insight, or *jnana*. Emerson referred to it as “gnosis,” knowing, and indeed that Greek term is related as a distant cognate cousin to the Sanskrit *jnana*. It was the deeply speculative wisdom literature of the Upanishads and Vedanta philosophy that caught and carried the imagination of Emerson toward the “unity of spirit” that seemed to pervade the Hindu view of the world. The Transcendent, which Emerson referred to as the “unbounded, unboundable empire” is the one light “which beams out of a thousand stars” and at the same time the “one soul which animates all men.” He perceived that the “highest object of their religion” is to restore the bond linking the soul, called *atman*, to the Eternal, called *paramatman*, which Emerson referred to as the “Over-Soul.”<sup>3</sup> While he speaks of it as “their religion,” in one sense experiencing the unity of this Over-Soul became his own. In Emerson himself the perspectives of the ancient Indian Upanishads and the nineteenth-century Transcendentalists came together, directing our human vision toward the oneness of spirit underlying the whole universe.

Emerson’s vision led to the publication of what he called the “Ethnical Scriptures.” In his view, scripture now needed to be seen in the plural. The “Bibles” of the world, like the Bhagavad Gita, are many, and the spiritual paths of humankind are many as well. Emerson’s vision had a certain Hindu hue and tenor to it—a wideness of spirit, a recognition of the many revelations of truth, and a sense that America was the place where the transcendent unity of religions might indeed be realized. His work, woven seamlessly and sometimes without attribution with citations from his reading of Hindu and Buddhist scriptures, is a kind of literary testimony to the incipient meeting of East and West.

Emerson’s younger friend Henry David Thoreau also participated in the “Easting” spirit of the mid-nineteenth century. Thoreau developed some familiarity with the texts to which he had access—a copy of William Jones’s translation of the *Laws of Manu*, loaned by Emerson, who had borrowed it from the library of Boston’s Athenaeum, copies of H. H. Wilson’s translation of the *Vishnu Purana*, and a copy of Rammohan Roy’s translation of the Upanishads. When he built his cabin at Walden Pond in the outskirts of Concord, Thoreau clearly had the Bhagavad Gita with him. He wrote from his retreat in 1845, “In the morning, I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta . . . in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and

trivial.”<sup>4</sup> He marveled at both the physical and mystical connections between his beloved Walden and the holy Ganges, as big blocks of ice from the pond he called “God’s Drop” were cut and hauled up to the train tracks that skirted Walden, sent by rail into Boston, and by ship to India.

Some say Thoreau’s interest in yoga practice and his self-image as a kind of yogi on the shores of Walden was simply a literary self-presentation, a faddish device. But a few scholars, more familiar with the Indian literature Thoreau knew, see Thoreau as finding in yoga—which he understands generally as contemplative practice—a confirmation of his own ecstatic, mystical experience. Thoreau was not a Hindu. In fact, he insisted, “I do not prefer one religion or philosophy to another. . . . I pray to be delivered from narrowness, partiality, exaggeration—bigotry.” Even so, he found illumination in the India he came to know in his imagination and states of consciousness. “Farthest India is nearer to me than Concord & Lexington,” he wrote, referring to the India he had found echoed within his own soul.<sup>5</sup>

#### VIVEKANANDA: AMERICA’S FIRST HINDU

If we imagine ourselves in New England in the 1890s, where Hindu thought had been shifting the mental and spiritual furniture of Boston’s intellectuals for more than fifty years, we may be astonished to realize that few New Englanders had ever met a Hindu face-to-face. What came to be called Hinduism was a religious perspective borne on the trade winds from the East. As such, it was susceptible to both the condemnation and romanticism that characterized the “orientalist” perspective. Western observers measured the exoticized “other” against their own norms and needs. Some saw India as pagan, polytheistic, and idolatrous in the light of their own Christian assumptions; others reached for India as the homeland of the most universal and sublime religious aspirations, somehow filling an empty space in their own religious lives. So in the late summer of 1893, when a handsome thirty-year-old Hindu reformer, Swami Vivekananda, arrived in Boston for a month’s stay before the opening of the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, it is no wonder that he attracted a great deal of attention. For most New Englanders, his was the very first Hindu voice they had ever heard.

Vivekananda was a disciple of the Hindu saint of Calcutta, Sri Ramakrishna. He had come by ship from Calcutta to Vancouver and then traveled by train to Chicago, arriving more than a month early for the

parliament, which was to be held in September of 1893 in conjunction with the Chicago World's Fair. He quickly ran out of money. Fortunately, on the train from the West Coast he had met a Boston woman, Kate Sanborn, who graciously invited him to her house in the country outside Boston—not far from where the Sri Lakshmi Temple stands today. Sanborn had been a professor of literature at Smith College. At her estate, she introduced Swami Vivekananda to a number of Bostonians, including Harvard classics professor J. H. Wright. At Professor Wright's invitation, Vivekananda delivered his first public lecture in the U.S. at the Unitarian Universalist Church on the North Shore. In the next few weeks, he caused a stir wherever he appeared in the area clad in his silk tunic and turban. Here was an articulate, well-educated Hindu who spoke English eloquently, could explain the religious ideals of far India, and could respond to all their questions—from the mysteries of yoga to the mistreatment of women.

At the parliament in Chicago, Vivekananda was received with enthusiasm. Perhaps America's own burgeoning universalist spirit was eager to hear that spirit echoed by a young Hindu reformer from the other side of the world. As the parliament opened, Vivekananda had uttered only five words, "Brothers and Sisters of America . . ." when the audience burst into applause. In his speech he called for a universal religion "which would have no place for persecution or intolerance in its polity, and would recognize a divinity in every man or woman, and whose whole scope, whose whole force would be centered in aiding humanity to realize its Divine nature."<sup>6</sup> To underline the unity of the adherents of all religious traditions assembled, he proclaimed,

It is the same light coming through different colors. . . . But in the heart of everything the same truth reigns; the Lord has declared to the Hindu in his incarnation as Krishna, "I am in every religion as the thread through a string of pearls. And wherever thou seest extraordinary holiness and extraordinary power raising and purifying humanity, know yet that I am there."<sup>7</sup>

Through the writings of Emerson and Thoreau and the various stripes of Unitarians and Transcendentalists, the audience had some familiarity with Hindu ideas—the eternal soul, universal and common to all people, and its oneness with the Divine. But here was a man who spoke this message with passion from the heart and, as he put it, on behalf of the three hundred million Hindus of India. One journalist wrote of

him, “Vivekananda’s address before the parliament was broad as the heavens above us, embracing the best in all religions, as the ultimate universal religion—charity to all mankind, good works for the love of God, not for fear of punishment or hope of reward.”<sup>8</sup>

After the close of the parliament in September of 1893, Vivekananda stayed on in the U.S. for two years, lecturing and teaching, hoping to raise money for the humanitarian work of the Ramakrishna Mission in India. He not only visited the large East and West Coast cities but also spoke to eager audiences in Des Moines, Memphis, Detroit, and Minneapolis. He returned to Boston many times, speaking at the Methodist church in Lynn, at the Procopeia Club on St. Botolph Street, at Radcliffe College, and at Harvard. During the summer of 1894 Vivekananda settled at a farm called Green Acre in Eliot, Maine, where he taught Vedanta to a summer encampment of Transcendentalists and seekers. The local paper reported, “Each morning he meets a company of men and women under a large pine tree in the woods, and sitting cross-legged, discourses to them of the things of the soul.”<sup>9</sup>

During this time, Swami Vivekananda sowed and tended the seeds of what would become America’s first Hindu organization, the Vedanta Society. Vivekananda not only was fluent in English, he also became fluent in the distinctive American idiom necessary to translate Vedanta for the West. If we had gone to hear him on January 12, 1896, at Hardman Hall in New York, for example, we would have heard a discourse on “The Ideal of a Universal Religion.” Following along with his lecture gives us a glimpse of the kinds of Hindu ideas that might have appealed to late-nineteenth-century Americans and continue to have appeal even today.

He began with a sober look at the record of religion, which resonates all too well a hundred years later: “No other human interest has deluged the world in so much in blood as religion; at the same time nothing has built so many hospitals and asylums for the poor . . . as religion. Nothing makes us so cruel as religion, nothing makes us so tender as religion.”<sup>10</sup> All religions seem to be susceptible to what he called the “disease of fanaticism.” He looks at the clear evidence. “Each religion brings out its own doctrines, and insists upon them as being the only real ones.” In the area of mythology, each invests its own with reality and dismisses the other.

The Christian believes that God took the shape of a dove, and came down, and they think this is history, and not mythology. But the Hindu believes that God is manifested in the cow. Christians

say that is mythology, and not history: superstition. The Jews think that if an image be made in the form of a box, or a chest, with an angel on either side, then it is to be placed in the Holy of Holies; it is sacred to Jehovah; but if the image be made in the form of a beautiful man or woman, they say "This horrible idol; break it down."

As for rituals, Christians look at the Hindu worship of the *linga* and see it as phallic worship, while Hindus look at the Christian sacrament of communion and are repulsed by its symbolic cannibalism.

Religion is not the place to look for what is universal, he said. Religion, after all, is a human expression, and religions are as different as our cultures. For our universal kinship we must look not to religion, but to God and to our deepest humanity, which is the soul, struggling godward. Vivekananda quotes the apostle Paul in the appeal he made to the Athenians on the Areopagus, where he speaks of the many gods of the Greeks and the "unknown god," the one "in whom we live and move and have our being." It is this God who is the unity running through all these religions, like a thread through a string of pearls. To illustrate, he presented his New York audience with an age-old Hindu analogy:

Suppose we each one of us go with a particular pot in our hand to fetch water from a lake. . . . He who has brought the cup has water in the form of a cup, he who brought the jar, his water is in the shape of a jar, and so forth. . . . So, in the case of religion, our minds are like these little pots, and each one of us is seeing God. God is like that water filling the form of the vessel. Yet He is One. He is God in every case.

Vivekananda brought more than ideas; he brought a path of realization. Spiritual growth comes from inside out, he explained, like the growth of a plant. A teacher can help remove the obstructions, but spiritual growth is the flowering of one's innate oneness with God. Vivekananda considered the burden of original sin, which the Christian tradition placed so heavily upon the soul, a "standing libel" on human nature, which is inherently divine. The paths toward realizing that divine one within are many. They are called *yogas*, religious disciplines, and different paths suit our different natures. As we have seen, the path of action is *karma yoga*, the path of devotion, *bhakti yoga*, and the path of wisdom, *jñana yoga*.



The particular path Vivekananda taught he called Raja Yoga, the “royal path,” which he described as both mystical and psychological. It is a form of spiritual discipline based on the cultivation of concentration. That night in New York he described it this way:

In the present state of our body we are so much distracted, the mind is frittering away its energies upon a hundred sorts of things. As soon as I try to calm my thoughts and concentrate my mind upon one object of knowledge, thousands of thoughts rush into the brain. How to check that, bring it under control, this is the whole subject of Raja Yoga.

Concentration is the key to this “psychological way to union.” The chemist, the astronomer, the professor, the working person—all are able to excel in what they do only by concentration, bringing the mind to one-pointedness. So it must be with the spiritual life, the disciplines of body and mind that will lead to clarity and concentration in the realization of God. In short, in this and many of his American lectures, Vivekananda set forth a form of Hindu thought and practice that would be, he thought, both appealing and useful in the American context.

When Vivekananda’s little book called *Raja Yoga* was published in 1900, it provided, in summary form, the basics of yoga practice: the postures of the body (*asanas*), the control of the breath (*pranayama*), and the stages along the path of realization. It has been in print for nearly a century and is still widely read. The yoga described here is both psychological and experimental. Vivekananda repeatedly uses the term *scientific* to convey the way in which the path of yoga and the markers along the way have been verified by generations of practitioners, right to the present day.<sup>11</sup> As we shall see, the notion that Hinduism is the religion for the age of psychology, secularism, and science is one that will be sounded repeatedly in the decades that follow.

Not only did Vivekananda launch the Vedanta Society in America to bring Hindu spirituality to the West, he also launched the Ramakrishna Mission in India, complete with an order of monks dedicated to religious service. When Wendell Thomas surveyed the history of Vedanta and other early Hindu movements in the U.S. in 1930, in a book with the alarming title *Hinduism Invades America*, he made the provocative observation that “While India is getting more of the Christian side of Vivekananda’s dual religion of renunciation and service, America is getting only the strictly Hindu side.” Indeed, the Ramakrishna Mission in

India was establishing hospitals and schools, engaging in the kind of service ministry that some associated with Christian missions. In America, however, Vivekananda had seen a kind of spiritual bankruptcy and placed a heavy emphasis on the cultivation of the inner life. In pondering what the Hindu conservatism of the American Vedanta Society meant, when contrasted with the Hindu liberalism of the Ramakrishna Mission in India, Thomas wrote, "It means that of all the countries of the world including India itself, the United States offers the most fertile soil for the growth of conservative Hindu ideals."<sup>12</sup> He insightfully conjectured that America is a land of both pioneers and religious seeking, and Americans tend to participate aggressively, single-mindedly, and wholeheartedly in whatever they do. By the 1930s the Vedanta Society appealed particularly to nominal, liberal Christians, who came to see Christianity anew in the context of the Hindu claim to the equality of all religious traditions. It also appealed to secular seekers with no previous stake in any religious tradition who were attracted by its "scientific" language and yoga practice.

#### THE VEDANTA SOCIETY TODAY

One blustery March morning, I found the brownstone on New York's Upper West Side where the Vedanta Society of New York makes its home. It is the oldest of America's some two dozen Vedanta Societies, tracing its history to 1894 and Swami Vivekananda's stay in New York following the parliament. I rang the bell and was greeted by a soft-spoken young woman. "The swami is on his way down," she said, as she invited me into the front hall and settled me in the sitting room. I looked into the adjacent chapel while I waited.

The chapel looked much like others I had seen in Vedanta Societies across the country. It is a peaceful, carpeted room, softly lit, with about a hundred chairs arranged in rows facing the altar. The woman who received me explained that the chapel is filled to capacity on Sunday mornings. On Tuesday and Friday evenings when Swami Tathagatananda lectures on the Gita, there is a smaller group. In the past ten or fifteen years, however, the number of Indian American immigrants has steadily increased and now constitutes nearly half the congregation. From my observation, this shift in the composition of the old, fairly white, Vedanta Society is happening all across America. In this Vedanta Society, new Hindu immigrants find an already-assimilated form of Hindu religious

life that emphasizes universal ideals. The multitude of glittering gods we saw in Sunnysvale have no overt presence here.

At the center of the altar is a black-and-white photograph of Vivekananda's teacher, Sri Ramakrishna, the Bengali mystic who spoke of experiencing the Divine One in all the panoply of names and forms—tasting the Divine as Krishna, Shiva, and the Goddess, as the Buddha and the Christ. A visitor first encountering a photograph of the stubbly-bearded, crooked-smiling face of Ramakrishna might well be puzzled to see him there on the altar, flanked by two vases of fresh flowers. This ecstatic saint of Calcutta might seem out of place on the urbane Upper West Side. But Ramakrishna was a powerful engine of spiritual energy, and anyone born in India would recognize this face immediately.

To either side of Ramakrishna on the altar stand images of Jesus and the Buddha, expressing the spiritually eclectic message of Vedanta. On the right wall is a portrait of Sharada Devi, Ramakrishna's wife, who became his celibate companion whom he honored as a goddess, and on the left wall is a portrait of the young Vivekananda. The altar confirms the plurality of the Hindu universe but in a different key than the altars of Sunnysvale and Livermore. Here oneness of the many extends beyond the gods and spiritual ways of India to the religious ways of the wider world.

After a few minutes, Swami Tathagatananda appeared, wearing a faintly orange velour sweatshirt—a dim signal of the orange robes of the *sannyasi*, “renouncer,” of India—along with slacks and running shoes. The swami has been in New York for decades, and his summary of the teachings of Vedanta has been honed to a few bare points for an American audience. He touched on them skillfully as we talked:

- God is one; people worship him in different forms.
- Humanity, in its essential nature, is divine.
- The goal of humanity is to realize this divinity.
- The ways to realize this divinity are innumerable. They are called the yogas. As Sri Ramakrishna declared, “As many faiths, so many paths.”

As we spoke, it was clear that the swami, like Vivekananda before him, cares little for the outward structures of what we call religion. He would understand, but not be eager to participate in, the life of the Sri Lakshmi temple in Ashland or the Sunnysvale temple in the Silicon Valley. His favorite American is Abraham Lincoln, whom he admires for his

truthfulness, humility, and inner strength as well as for his disregard for institutionalized religion. The Vedanta Society does not proselytize, advertise, or press its message on the public. It is here for those who seek. "This is the temple that counts," he said, pointing to his heart. "They say people in America are very religious, meaning they frequent churches or synagogues or temples. They have an altar at home with a cross or a picture of Kali. That is that. But nothing changes in their lives. But I tell you, it is not what you do or know in your head that matters. Finally, it is whether your heart is transformed, whether your life is transformed. That is the only thing that matters."

The distrust of institutions and the transformation of the heart sounded familiar to me as a Protestant, for this was the very stuff of the Reformation and the religion of the heart the very drumbeat of my own Methodist tradition. But I also thought of the too-often exclusivist narrowness of born-again faith. I asked, "And what of the Christian fundamentalists who have a strong heartfelt experience of transformation and are born again but insist theirs is the only way?"

"To think you own the Almighty cannot but be counterfeit," he replied. "No real experience of the infinite presence of God can leave you condemning your neighbor. When Christ suffered on the cross, he did not condemn either the thieves next to him or the executioners. God within us is 'the way, the truth, the life.'"

You won't hear the Vedanta swamis of today confronting or debating the chauvinism of new fundamentalist Christianity, or new fundamentalist Hinduism, for that matter. Their style is almost wholly oriented toward teaching, and modest newspaper notices will tell you where and when you might hear them at one of America's some twenty Vedanta Societies.

When Vivekananda returned to India in 1896, after three years in America, he sent Swami Abhedananda to take up the reins of the small New York community, the predecessor of the community I visited that morning. Swami Abhedananda was a vigorous organizer and a fine lecturer. He delivered hundreds of lectures on Vedanta in Manhattan in the late 1890s. Vivekananda returned to the U.S. for a second stay in 1899 and started the second Vedanta Society, in San Francisco, putting Swami Turiyananda in charge. There in 1906 the first real Hindu temple in North America was erected: a whimsical Victorian architectural delight with cupolas, steeples, domes, and spires all testifying to the *pluribus* within. Somehow it survived the earthquake that same year, and you can still see it today. It is a Victorian architectural expression of the universal embrace of Vedanta.

Unfortunately, Swami Vivekananda did not live to see his splendid San Francisco headquarters. He left America for the last time in 1900. Debilitated by diabetes, he died in 1902—on the Fourth of July. He was only thirty-nine years old. By then the institutions he had begun were strong enough to continue without him, though it can only be imagined what growth would have taken place had his immense, cyclonic energy continued to infuse the movement for another thirty years. The flow of monks to the U.S. continued as dozens of swamis from the Ramakrishna Mission in India came in succession to the United States to take the lead in the growing number of Vedanta Society centers—in Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Providence, Boston, Portland.

Despite its long history in America, the Vedanta Society has never gained wide attention, primarily because its form of organization did not become truly American. There was no unified national Vedanta Society structure. Instead, each center retained and still retains a direct relation with the headquarters in Calcutta, and each received its religious leadership from headquarters, even though there have been Euro-American *sannyasis* involved for one hundred years now. As early as 1895, Vivekananda had invited a small group of American followers to an intensive training retreat on one of the islands of the St. Lawrence River. There he initiated two Western followers as *sannyasis*. A small order of Euro-Americans who speak of themselves as monks and nuns continues today. They are associated with both the urban temples and rural retreat centers. The Vedanta Society of Southern California, for example, has a convent at Montecito near Santa Barbara and a monastery in Trabuco Canyon near Los Angeles. The Vedanta Society of Chicago has a monastery and retreat center in a town in Michigan, appropriately named Ganges, Michigan. All this time, however, the leadership of the Vedanta Society centers has remained firmly in the control of Indian monks of the Ramakrishna order, sent from the headquarters in Calcutta.

The Vedanta Society became very American in one sense, with chapels and chairs, Sunday morning services and weekday evening study classes. Some swamis took American citizenship, leaving behind the monastic orange robes for suits and ties, even orange velour sweatshirts and Reeboks. Yet still the culture of the leadership always came from Calcutta. Not until the new post-1965 immigration did the Vedanta Society experience a burst of growth, this time from new Indian immigrants who discovered the legacy of Vivekananda in their new homeland.

## YOGANANDA AND THE "SCIENCE OF RELIGION"

For forty years—from the 1930s to the 1970s—the most popular Hindu movement in America was the Self-Realization Fellowship. Yogananda, its founder, was another Hindu teacher who, like Vivekananda, came to America for a conference and stayed to launch a religious movement. He came from Bengal to a meeting of the International Congress of Religious Liberals held in Boston in 1920 and sponsored by the Unitarian Church, and he stayed for over thirty years.

Yogananda's theme song was one that struck a popular chord in America: the uniting of science and religion. Many Americans tended to see science and religion as opposites, so as one moved into the world of science and rationality, one would have to move away from religion. Yogananda insisted that the Hindu yoga tradition was itself a science—the "science of religion." Like Vivekananda before him, he pointed out that religion cannot be a secondhand matter learned from authorities in churches or temples, acquired by reading scriptures or by learning doctrines. Religious life must be firsthand: based in and confirmed by experience. In this, religion is like science, a worldview tested through experiment and experience. As Yogananda put it in that very first lecture in Boston, "Yoga is a system of scientific methods for reuniting the soul with the Spirit."<sup>13</sup> In 1925 in Los Angeles he founded the Yogoda Satsang, which eventually became known as the Self-Realization Fellowship, with the aim "to unite science and religion through realization of the unity of their underlying principles" and "to disseminate among the nations a knowledge of definite scientific techniques for attaining direct personal experience of God."

Yogananda looked every bit the exotic swami, but he spoke of the principles of the inner and spiritual world as very much like those that govern the physical world. They can be observed and confirmed repeatedly. "The principles that operate in the outer universe, discoverable by scientists, are called natural laws. But there are subtler laws that rule the hidden spiritual places and the inner realm of consciousness; these principles are knowable through the science of yoga." India's yogis have experimented for hundreds of years in the inner realm. They have refined their knowledge of inner terrain. Far from being abstract and mystical, this path is very practical and embodied. This body of flesh and bones is not at odds with some other entity called the spirit but is the very vehicle of spiritual practice. As the body learns stillness, the mind learns stillness.



Though today we might associate yoga primarily with the postures that have become popular for health and fitness, the broader basis of yoga taught by Yogananda was the discipline of the mind, the practice of inner one-pointedness. In this practice, there are markers along the path of inner development toward “self-realization.” One needs a teacher both to get started, and to check one’s progress along the path. For thousands of Americans, Yogananda was that teacher. He developed a mail-order self-study course covering 180 lessons, enabling distant learners in Minneapolis or Schenectady to cover one lesson a week, practice at home, and periodically attend a Self-Realization Fellowship convention for personal guidance along the path.

This remarkable swami had a great inclination toward and gift for organization. By 1930, in addition to the Los Angeles center, there were twelve centers in major U.S. cities, claiming some twenty-five thousand members. For him, yoga was not a specifically Hindu practice but a practice that could benefit everyone. Yogananda’s students and supporters included scientists like Luther Burbank, an architect from Cleveland, and a New York textile manufacturer. He emphasized that one could be a Catholic yogi or a Methodist yogi. Indeed, Yogananda spoke of what he called the “original Christianity,” which teaches the realization of “Christ-consciousness” within. Like some Christian teachers, he encouraged yoga practitioners to offer testimonials to the value of yoga practice in their own lives, and the issues of the publication *East-West* are filled with the stories of yoga practitioners testifying to the transformation the practice brought to their lives.

Yogananda put yoga on the map in America. He liked America. It became his home, and he developed distinctively American organizational strategies and public relations. He posed for photos with President Calvin Coolidge and prescribed a vegetarian diet for the president’s health. He observed the Fourth of July and Lincoln’s Birthday with public greetings. At his ashram headquarters in Los Angeles he gathered the Self-Realization Fellowship to celebrate Christmas, Easter, and Thanksgiving. There were greeting cards, Christmas cards, SRF pins and insignia items, and sheet music for the “Song of Brahma” and “Om Song.” All this led Wendell Thomas to conclude, “Swami Yogananda is even more American in method than in message.” The popularity of Yogananda was further enhanced in 1946 with a book tie-in—the publication of his famous *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which has been continuously in print and basic reading for those on the path of yoga for more than fifty years.

The great yogi died on March 7, 1952. On that day, he is said to have entered into a deep state of meditation and passed away, according to all medical measurements. However, his body remained incorruptible for twenty days before interment. So remarkable was this fact to the mortuary director, Mr. Harry T. Rowe, that he had an affidavit drawn up and notarized:

The absence of any visual signs of decay in the dead body of Paramahansa Yogananda offers the most extraordinary case in our experience. . . . No physical disintegration was visible in his body even twenty days after death. . . . This state of perfect preservation of a body is, so far as we know from mortuary annals, an unparalleled one. . . . He looked on March 27th as fresh and unravaged by decay as he had on the night of his death.<sup>14</sup>

Today the Lake Shrine Center that Yogananda established in 1950 is a sanctuary of the spirit in Los Angeles, where Sunset Boulevard meets the sea. Of the ten other SRF ashrams and centers in the U.S., eight are in California, and SRF meetings are held in virtually every state. But the Lake Shrine Center is the jewel in the crown. It is a leafy spiritual oasis, with its facilities circling a small lake, a world away from the world. Visiting the center in the mid-1990s, I picked up a copy of one of Yogananda's most popular writings, the little book called *Scientific Healing Affirmations*, and, looking through its pages, was struck by the contemporary sound of the mind-body language he uses.

In this little booklet Yogananda writes about the power of words and thoughts to shape consciousness and therefore to influence our health. "The mind, being the brain, feeling, and perception of all living cells, can keep the human body alert or depressed," he writes. "Just as we concern ourselves with the nutritive value of our daily food menus, so should we consider the nutritive potency of the psychological menus that we daily serve the mind." An issue of the SRF journal from the Lake Shrine bookstore confirmed my hunch: the movement does indeed see Yogananda as the forerunner of today's mind-body medical movement, anticipating many of these developments by at least four decades.<sup>15</sup> It cites parallels with Dr. Carl Simonton, who pioneered the use of mental visualization in cancer treatment. It cites Norman Cousins, who wrote, "What we put into our minds can be as important as what we put into our bodies. . . . Negative emotions, persisting over a long period of time, can impair the immune system, thus lowering the body's defenses against disease." And,

of course, it mentions Yogananda's kinship with the medical pioneer of the mind-body movement, Dr. Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School, who subjected meditators to scientific testing and found,

Through meditation . . . you can set the stage for important mind- and habit-altering brain change. . . . Scientific research has shown that electrical activity between the left and right sides of the brain becomes coordinated during certain kinds of meditation and prayer. . . . The implications are exciting and even staggering.

By the 1980s doctors in white coats were teaching a simple version of some of the kinds of meditation exercises that Indian swamis in orange robes had been teaching for hundreds of years.

Until 1965 the Self-Realization Fellowship was the most extensive Hindu organization in the U.S. Thinking back on both Vivekananda and Yogananda from today's standpoint, we can see that both introduced to America a body of thought and practice that had attracted considerable attention even before the great turning East of the 1960s and 1970s, even before the new immigration, even before the great wave of gurus who came with the new immigration. They began the process of slipping a holistic worldview under the crumbling foundations of American secularism. By the 1980s it would be called New Age, and by the 1990s it would gain the currency of a prevailing way of looking at things. Even the Harvard University Health Services would have a Mind-Body Clinic. In this view, science and religion, body and mind, matter and spirit are seen not as contending opposites but as inextricably interrelated. Health is a spiritual matter, just as spirituality is a form of fitness. Call it yoga, call it New Age, call it Hindu—this has become a holistic way of thinking that is prevalent in the U.S. today as never before.

#### TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION AND THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

After Yogananda, the next great teacher in the record book of Hindu America is the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who became known simply by his title, the Maharishi. The form of simple meditation practice he taught has become virtually a household word in America—TM, short for Transcendental Meditation. The Maharishi was trained in the monastery of the Shankaracharya of Jyotimath high in the Indian Himalayas. In the late 1950s he launched what he modestly called a mission for the “spiri-

tual regeneration” of the whole world, settings his sights on Europe and the U.S. His first trip to the U.S. was in 1959, and he gave his first lecture on this form and philosophy of meditation in San Francisco, traveling next to Los Angeles, New York, London, and Germany. Those in my generation in the 1960s remember the Maharishi as the guru of the Beatles. The campus-based movement he launched in the U.S. became known as the Students International Meditation Society (SIMS), and by the 1970s there were SIMS centers at over a thousand American colleges and universities. By the early 1980s, the society estimated that more than 1.5 million Americans had received a mantra and begun practicing TM under a teacher’s instruction. Today the TM movement has meditation centers, a university—Maharishi International University in Fairfield, Iowa—and a political party, the Natural Law party.

TM literature describes the practice as a “simple, natural, effortless, easily learned mental technique practiced for 15 to 20 minutes twice daily, sitting comfortably with the eyes closed.” The movement insists this is not Hinduism, indeed not religion at all, but a technique of concentration. Focusing on a mantra, a powerful sound or word imparted by the teacher at the time of initiation, the meditator is able to realize the natural and blissful state of completely relaxed, yet wakeful, consciousness. No uncomfortable lotus postures are necessary, no exotic clothing, prayer shawls, beads, or cushions. Just sit in a chair, in comfortable clothing, at home. Anyone can learn TM, no matter what one’s religion or culture, age or educational background.

The Maharishi was a spiritual entrepreneur in the best sense. TM introductory sessions were frequent and free. However, the course of training that led to receiving a mantra for meditation cost enough money to take it seriously. The Maharishi must have perceived, and rightly so, that Americans are very practical people, like to do things for themselves, and are more apt to commit themselves to those things they pay for. New practitioners who had just invested in their initiation were likely to put in their twenty minutes of practice twice a day—at least for long enough to begin to realize the fruits of practice. And there was no question the practice would bear fruit. Fifteen or twenty minutes of simple meditation, twice a day, would be good for just about anyone. It did not need to be called Hindu, for in the fast-paced and stress-filled life of mid-twentieth-century America it was just a common-sense dose of sanity.

The success of TM is attributable, in part, to its playing down any distinctively Hindu context of meditation and emphasizing instead its

scientifically demonstrable value as a technique for concentrating and stilling the mind, enlarging and focusing awareness, relaxing the body, and lowering metabolism. While scholars can see the continuities with India's forms of meditation, many practitioners would find these links inconsequential for themselves and do not identify as Hindu in any way. In their view, this is not a religion, not a philosophy, but a technique—like turning on a light switch or using a lever to move a big rock. It can be practiced, so they say, by Christian ministers, Jewish rabbis, and people who have no religious affiliation at all.

Today TM is practiced by corporate executives and lawyers, school-teachers and professors, even by military personnel and blue-collar workers. "TM Can Improve Job Performance" was the headline of the Kankakee, Illinois, *Daily Journal* (February 23, 1997). The reporter, Tracy Ahrens, began,

Business people, locally and around the world, are jumping at the opportunity to offer transcendental meditation (TM) to their employees in order to increase job performance and decrease the number of work absences due to illness. TM is a simple technique that is performed for 20 minutes, twice a day in a fairly quiet location. Today, over four million people around the world practice this form of meditation.

The TM movement appeals to Americans who are practical about their spirituality. In this way it stands clearly in the traditions that had been cultivated in the U.S. by both Vivekananda and Yogananda. Like his predecessors, the Maharishi used the language of science to explain spiritual exercises to a scientifically minded American audience. He courted the verification of scientists as part of the presentation of TM in the American context. The earliest research on TM meditators was pioneered by UCLA physiologist Robert Keith Wallace for his Ph.D. thesis in the late 1960s, entitled "The Physiological Effects of Transcendental Meditation: A Proposed Fourth Major State of Consciousness." In the early 1970s TM meditators approached Dr. Herbert Benson, a Boston Harvard-affiliated physician, and volunteered to be hooked up to instruments that would measure the physiological changes that took place as they entered into states of deep meditation. In 1975 Benson's popular book *The Relaxation Response* put into plain English the results of his research: that meditation can produce the decreased metabolism that researchers referred to as a hypometabolic state, a deep rest that can

reduce blood pressure and begin to diffuse stress. Benson's research is part of what, by now, seems a virtual explosion of mind-body clinics and meditation workshops for people with chronic pain, heart disease, cancer, and stress.

A 1991 pamphlet on TM says on its cover, "A Scientifically Validated Program." TM is described as developing "the simplest form of human awareness, where consciousness is open to itself." The meditation practice is described as "the technology of the unified field," which develops the physiology of deep rest, with decreased respiratory rate, lower plasma lactate levels, and increased basal resistance. Research published in the *American Journal of Physiology*, *Scientific American*, and the *International Journal of Neuroscience* is cited, and it is noted that over the past twenty-five years there have been more than 500 scientific research experiments on TM at 210 research institutes and universities in 33 countries. Here the specifically Hindu language of the yogis has been completely replaced by the language of science. One of the primary TM Web sites today describes the Maharishi as "the foremost scientist in the field of consciousness."

For a time in the 1980s and early 1990s, the Maharishi linked his dedication to mind-body medicine with that of Deepak Chopra, a Boston medical doctor of Indian origin. Chopra's book *Quantum Healing*, a work written during a period of close collaboration with the Maharishi, describes the "quantum mechanical human body," where astonishingly, on a day-to-day basis, the drama of the mind-body connection is enacted. Thought—the thought of fear, for example—is transformed into neuropeptide, a form of matter. Health is not the absence of invasion by disease but the presence of homeostatic harmony of body, mind, and spirit. Chopra sees the foundation of mind-body medicine as the link between our states of mind and the physiology and biochemistry of our bodies. By the dawn of the new millennium, it is a medical doctor of Indian origin, not a swami, who speaks of the "science of awareness," the process that enables one to move through the sheaths or vestures of the soul described by Vedanta, from the material body to the breath to the mind to pure consciousness, and, finally, to pure bliss.

The term *holistic* has become the common coin of what is sometimes called the New Age, a way of thinking and living that tries to break free of the dualistic opposition of science and spirit, outer and inner, body and mind. This turn of mind has gradually saturated the whole of American culture with essentially Hindu, more broadly Asian, ideas without



speaking of them as such. Swami Yogananda, who had spoken of the science of religion and had an avid interest in the relation of spirituality to health decades before all this flowered, would surely have looked on the emergence of this “new age” with satisfaction.

## GURUS AND THE NEW RELIGIOUS AMERICA

When the 1965 immigration act opened the door to immigration from Asia, among the beneficiaries of the new policy were not only the engineers, computer scientists, physicians, and nurses who came to the U.S. in great numbers, but also religious teachers or gurus, like the Maharishi. The term *guru* entered into the American vocabulary with the steady stream of teachers who brought their philosophies, meditation practices, spiritual leadership, and eccentricities to America. In the Hindu tradition, becoming a teacher has traditionally meant receiving the blessing and authority to teach from one’s own teacher. It is not a matter of academic degrees but of recognizing that the student has learned deeply the wisdom of the tradition and can teach it with authenticity. Hindus in India know, however, that there are all kinds of gurus, some more fully in possession of the insights of the tradition than others. And in India it is taken for granted that some alleged gurus are downright bogus. In America, however, who was to say? All had a chance to attract a following. In the past thirty-five years, gurus have come and stayed, and come and gone.

Of the many Hindu gurus who came, exploded like the fireworks on the Fourth of July, and eventually disappeared, I will mention only two of the most memorable. In 1971 we saw the meteoric rise of the young boy-guru of the Divine Light Mission called Guru Maharaj Ji. By 1973 he was said to have initiated fifty thousand people who had “received knowledge” through him. He rented the Houston Astrodome for what was billed “the most significant event in human history.” It was unclear what was supposed to have happened, but the event was not well attended, leaving his organization in debt half a million dollars and on the road back to India. Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh also had a brief life in America. In the 1970s his ashram in Pune, India, had attracted young Americans and Europeans to a cathartic form of Hindu tantric meditation practice. In 1981 he established an ashram community in the small town of Antelope, Oregon, and the movement became widely known in the U.S., partially because of the controversies that ensued. Suddenly the small town had more than three thousand residents and a legendary fleet of

Rolls Royces for the guru. The city council refused the group new building permits, but soon the Rajneesh followers elected themselves to the council and changed the name Antelope to Rajneeshpuram, the “City of Rajneesh.” In 1985 the ashram disintegrated amidst a flurry of legal controversies and internal dissent. Eventually, Rajneesh returned to India.

Of the long-lasting new gurus of America, the senior statesman is Swami Satchidananda. He came in time for Woodstock in 1969, where he spoke a word of spirituality and attracted some of the assembled hippies of the day to the practice of yoga, and he stayed right on through the seventies and eighties. In 1993 he was at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, and in September of 2000 he was there with orange robes and long, now white, hair at the Millennium World Peace Summit at the United Nations. Swami Satchidananda’s 750-acre Integral Yoga Institute in the green hills of rural Virginia continues to attract yoga practitioners even today. Here you will find what is perhaps the most astonishing piece of spiritual architecture in the whole country: the Light of Truth Universal Shrine, or LOTUS. It is a domed, lotus-shaped temple of pink glass sitting like a huge glass flower in the green countryside. Entering this temple, you will find at the center an open shaft of light, reaching upward toward the infinity of the sky. Around it on the lotus petals of the periphery are twelve chapels, each dedicated to the Divine as seen in one of the world’s religious traditions. Hindu eclecticism has found a home here, with these lotus altars embracing all the religious traditions of America.

At the Siddha Yoga Dham Ashram in South Fallsburg, New York, this eclecticism takes a slightly different form, as the followers of the stylish Gurumayi observe *pujas* not only for the Hindu festivals of Diwali and Shiva Ratri, but also for Christmas, Passover, and Easter. Here in the Catskills, once famous as the spa country of America’s urban Jewish culture, Gurumayi’s own teacher, Swami Muktananda, established a retreat center in the late 1970s. A disciple of a long line of revered Hindu gurus, Muktananda taught a path of inner awakening called *siddha yoga*, aimed at awakening the transformative spiritual power that is deep within each of us. The touch of the guru’s *shakti*, or energy, can enable us to experience the divine consciousness within and to recognize that divine consciousness in others. When Muktananda died in 1982, there was a brief period of instability, intrigue, and turmoil while the two young gurus he had appointed his successors found their spiritual feet. Eventually, the young woman he had named Swami Chidvilasananda took over the movement. Known to her followers as Gurumayi, she has created a vibrant,

somewhat upscale, following. She teaches and bestows *shakti pat* in her primary ashrams at South Fallsburg in New York and Ganeshpuri in India and also conveys instruction through a network of smaller ashrams in places like Oakland, California, and Atlanta, Georgia. The Web site iconography of Siddha Yoga leaves behind distinctively Hindu motifs for a more universal iconography of autumn leaves, nautilus shells, and abstract images from the world of nature. For the time being, it seems that Gurumayi has made a critical transition in creating an American context for teachings and meditation practices that had traveled for centuries in Indian spiritual lineages.

The guru Ammachi creates a very different scene in the United States, with a soaring popularity that is astonishing for a woman from Kerala in India who communicates primarily in Malayalam, the language of Kerala. But her real language of communication is unconditional love, dispensed liberally to thousands who wait in line for hours to receive her blessing in the form of a hug. Her full name is Mata Amritanandamayi. She was born in a fisherman's family on the coast of Kerala and even as a child is said to have displayed an uncommon devotion to the Divine, first as Krishna and then as the Goddess. Her inborn nature, she says, was always to pour forth an unbroken stream of love toward all beings. Her ashram communities in India make clear that social service goes hand in hand with devotion. She runs two hospitals, an orphanage for about four hundred children, and a school committed to serving the poor through education. Ammachi first came to the United States in 1987 and since then has made regular tours through major American cities each summer, attracting both Indian immigrants and Euro-American seekers. For those who follow her or come to see her, this unselfconscious woman seems to become the "universal embodiment of Mother Love," and apparently there is a yearning and thirsting for this maternal love. Whether in the outskirts of Boston or midtown Manhattan, whenever her gatherings are announced many hundreds of seekers line up, sitting for hours on end, anticipating the moment she will embrace each one on her shoulder with the hug that is her special blessing.

America seems to have begun to learn the ropes of the gurus. It has kept some, let others go. There are frequent debunkings. But the power and importance of the guru—the presence, the word, the touch, and the image of the guru—were not concocted by the wild imaginings of the anticult movement of the 1970s, which saw untold dangers in such spiritual authority. The spiritual authority of the guru is central to the Hindu

tradition, in which religious knowledge is transmitted personally to the disciple from one who knows, not merely intellectually, but experientially. As Swami Muktananda put it in an article entitled “What Is a True Guru?”

The Guru is not a human being. The Guru is the grace-bestowing power of God. He transmits the power, the Shakti of God into you and awakens your own inner power.<sup>16</sup>

It would be fitting to round out our brief view of the new gurus of America with one who would have to be called an antiguru, so averse was he to precisely the guru described by Muktananda. That was J. Krishnamurti, who first visited the United States in 1911 and whose final years were lived out in the Ojai Valley of California until his death in 1986. As a young man, Krishnamurti had been hailed by the Theosophical Society’s Order of the Star of the East as the long-expected world teacher for our age. In 1929, however, he called his followers together and dissolved the order, maintaining that the very impulse to follow a teacher and cling to his teachings is what keeps us from realizing our own true nature. “I maintain that truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect.”<sup>17</sup> While Krishnamurti taught for decades, moving back and forth from India to Europe to America, and while he filled lecture halls in California and London, in Banaras and New York, he did not wish the label or the following of a guru, much less a Hindu guru.

When I first heard Krishnamurti in Banaras in 1965, I found that his teaching style relentlessly challenged our habitual propensity to label, compare, judge, and classify everything we hear, everything we experience. “Choiceless awareness” was the quality of mind that he tried to elicit in those he encountered: experiencing for ourselves the ground of our consciousness, before we build upon it the superstructures of our interpretations and the organized systems of our religions. Meditation can help cultivate this choiceless awareness, but even meditation can become too rigid. As he put it, “I am concerning myself with only one essential thing: to set man free. I desire to free him from all cages, from all fears, and not to found religions, new sects, nor to establish new theories and new philosophies.”<sup>18</sup> It was, of course, one of the ironies of Krishnamurti’s life that people followed him, listened to his lectures, and recorded his teachings as if to map that trackless land. After Krishnamurti died, the ranch home he kept in Ojai, California, has continued to flourish as a teaching center, and the Krishnamurti Foundation

of America there promotes the teachings of this antiguru of the age through an extensive library and a school aimed at cultivating in young people the freedom of mind that was his.

#### LORD KRISHNA COMES TO AMERICA

Another of the great gurus to come to America once we opened the door to Asia was A. C. Bhaktivedanta, a sixty-nine-year-old teacher who arrived in New York in 1965. His story has all the elements of a great American immigration epic. The former manager of a chemical firm in Calcutta, Bhaktivedanta had been instructed by his own spiritual teacher to carry devotion to Krishna from India to the West. He arrived nearly penniless in New York City and began his mission to America, chanting “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama” in Tompkins Square Park. He attracted a few followers in his joyful, even ecstatic, chanting, and within a few months he opened the first Krishna temple in America—a Second Avenue storefront on the lower east side. Within five years, his eager following had temples in thirty American cities. Such was the origin of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, ISKCON. This was not drugs, not heady philosophy, and above all not easy for young Americans of the sixties; it was hard-core devotional Hinduism of a sort America had never before seen.

One of his first followers was a young English instructor from Ohio State, who recalls the early life of the movement with the teacher they came to call Prabhupad, a title of reverence.

Prabhupad had prodigious energy. He was up every morning before any of us. He pounded the drum, exhausted everyone at kirtan, chanted hymns, danced, delivered lectures, translated books, cooked and supervised all affairs. And he was triple the age of any one of us.<sup>19</sup>

This distinctively devotional style of Hinduism did not seem a likely magnet for young Americans in the turmoil of the sixties. It was not a transcendental or universalist approach, it did not have the countercultural cachet of meditation or yoga. It was a very particular, distinctive form of Hindu devotionalism, called *bhakti*. Unlike TM, it was ritually complex. Unlike TM, it was unabashedly Hindu, and it drew Krishna’s new devotees into a world of Hindu worship, chanting, and devotional singing. Astonishingly enough, it attracted a dedicated group of young people.

I first encountered the Hare Krishnas in September of 1969 when I came to Harvard as a graduate student. I was a serious young scholar with furrowed brow, taking first-year Sanskrit and launching into the study of Hinduism. There they were in Harvard Square—Caucasian Hindus in saris and dhotis, dancing in a snake line to the rhythm of their hand cymbals and bells, chanting, “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna! Krishna, Krishna! Hare Hare!” They pressed magazines, books, and free sweets on anyone who would listen. Cambridge did not seem to me a likely spot for such energetic devotion or for any possible conversions. I wanted to cross the street when I saw them, but I also wanted to know who they were. So I finally took them up on their invitation to visit the temple, an old house in a working-class district across the Charles River from Cambridge.

I found that the fervent devotional piety could be traced to Chaitanya, an ecstatic saint who lived in Bengal in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. He popularized the form of worship called *kīrtan*, the chanting and singing of the holy name of God. The teachings of Vedānta philosophy and the practice of yoga did not touch the heart, he said, not like the singing of God’s name. And the rituals of the Brahmins were too expensive, too long, too caste bound with rules of purity and pollution. But the singing of God’s name required only love and broke down the barriers that divided people one from another. The followers of Chaitanya were not only caste Hindus but untouchables, even Muslims. It was a religious path defined by the love of God, not the rules of men. Chaitanya came to be seen by those who knew him as the living presence of Lord Krishna. Indeed, he came to be seen as an incarnation of Krishna and his beloved Radha in one body, demonstrating that the relation of the soul and God is as close as that of lover and beloved.

The Hare Krishna movement has been the most visible, though certainly not the largest, of the new Hindu movements in the United States. The path of *bhakti*, loving devotion, continues in ISKCON temples even today. Devotees are up at dawn, chanting the name of Krishna and participating in a traditional form of Hindu temple worship. They present offerings of food, flowers, water, and sweets to the divine presence of Krishna and Radha and receive, in turn, the divine grace, called *prasād*. They offer water to Krishna, pouring it over his feet through a conch shell, and then receive the sprinkled water as a blessing. They offer food and fruit and then eat together what had been consecrated by the Lord. They offer incense and then breathe its fragrance. They circle oil lamps before the face of Krishna and then pass their fingers through the flames



and touch their foreheads with reverence. While all this is the common ritual fare of a Hindu temple, it was a more richly sensual form of worship than young Americans of the sixties had ever known. It involved sight and sound, touch and fragrance, color and movement, chanting and dancing.

Introducing Swami Bhaktivedanta to an audience at Ohio State University in the spring of 1968, Allen Ginsberg said, "It's strange that so far out and ritualized an Indian form should take root in the United States a little more naturally than the more protestant Vedanta Society."<sup>20</sup> But from the standpoint of American religious history, perhaps it was not so strange. The fervent devotion of the Hare Krishnas and their sidewalk evangelism seems a natural cousin to the heartfelt evangelical streams of American Protestantism—from the Great Awakening of the seventeenth century to the born-again Christianity of the twentieth century. Though ascetic and renunciatory at the core, Krishna Consciousness also brought religion back to the senses—with movement and music, incense and ecstasy. It is also a mission movement, with the specific aim of enabling all to hear the sound of God's name, "Hare Krishna, Hare Rama," providing a much-needed opportunity for turning, if only for a moment, to God-consciousness. Of course, Krishna devotees annoyed merchants and passersby in Boston and St. Louis just as they had in north Indian market towns four hundred years ago.

The Hare Krishnas experienced the full impact of the anticult movement of the 1970s and 1980s. They were accused of brainwashing and mind control, much like the accusations that Protestant nativists had flung at Catholic monastic movements in America a century before. At the instigation of concerned parents, devotees were kidnapped by deprogrammers who tried to rescue them from the "cult" of Krishna. There were suits and court cases, accusations by disgruntled former members. There were testimonials by loyal devotees about the ways in which the community, the discipline, and the devotion of ISKCON had saved them from drugs and aimlessness. Like all religious movements, ISKCON has included a wide range of devotees, and it certainly cannot be painted with a single brush, even today.

Because of its demanding lifestyle, the Hare Krishna movement never gained a wide membership in America, but it has nonetheless persisted for more than thirty years. In the 1970s, when Hindu immigrants began to settle down in America in significant numbers, the Hare Krishna temples were the only temples they found. On Sunday after-

noons they could show up for the worship of Krishna, complete with devotional chanting and a lecture on the Gita, usually delivered by an eager and well-trained Caucasian devotee wearing the faded orange robes of a Hindu monk. They could enjoy a Sunday vegetarian meal and observe the great festival days that made them most nostalgic for their homes in India—the birthday of Krishna, the Diwali festival of lights, or the vigil of Shivaratri. In some cities, the ISKCON temple was a transitional space where they could settle and feel at home before organizing, or even building, a new temple. But in many American cities, the Hare Krishna temple has continued to create a community that serves both its Euro-American devotees and the new Hindu immigrants. The ISKCON temples in Dallas, Chicago, Denver, and Los Angeles, for example, have continued to involve both Euro-American and Indian American members. A young Indian man in Denver, when asked how he felt about attending the Krishna temple, put it this way: “Why should I feel funny there? They practice Hinduism. They’re Hindus. What’s the difference?” His wife remarked, “In a lot of ways, I feel we should be grateful to them. I mean here they are, Americans, working to bring our culture here.”

Every summer in Denver and Boston and in many other American cities, Krishna devotees celebrate their annual Chariot Festival, or Ratha Yatra. They bring the saucer-eyed images of Lord Krishna, his brother Balarama, and his sister Subhadra out of the temple and place them on a large chariot, or *ratha*, which they pull through the streets of the city on a pilgrimage among the people, a *yatra*. These public processions of the gods are common throughout India. They bear some resemblance to the festival processions of St. Anthony, the Virgin Mary, or Jesus through the streets in Italian or Portuguese Catholic cultures. For Hindus, this is a time when the movement of people to temple is reversed, and the deity leaves the temple to greet them in the streets. Among India’s most famous festivals of this sort is the Ratha Yatra of Lord Krishna at the seaside temple of Jagannatha in Puri in the eastern state of Orissa. There the image of Krishna is seated on a chariot with wheels some ten feet high. As devotees lean into the ropes, the wheels begin to roll with the inexorable momentum that gives us the word *juggernaut*. It is this festive procession, albeit with a smaller and more easily controlled chariot, that is repeated in America’s Festival of the Chariots. In Boston they pull the tall brightly decorated chariot up Beacon Hill, past the State House, and around Boston Common; in New York they pull Krishna’s chariot down Fifth Avenue; and in Los Angeles they treat Krishna to a trip along Venice

Beach. In the Hindu view, not only do the passersby have the opportunity to view Lord Krishna, but the Lord has the opportunity to behold the people and the urban landscape of the United States.

In the 1970s and early 1980s many Americans would have equated the Hare Krishnas with Hinduism in America. Most of us did not notice the gradual religious changes that were percolating with the new immigration. By the late 1980s, however, those who had worried about whether a few youngsters would don orange robes and worship Krishna suddenly found that their surgeon or anesthesiologist was now a Hindu, settled in the suburbs, and perhaps a worshiper of Krishna himself. Those who had worried about the brainwashing of devotees who chanted the name of Krishna now had to contend with psychiatrists of Indian origin who had known this devotional chanting from childhood and could not be enlisted in the anticult hysteria. For these new immigrants, chanting Hare Krishna was as familiar as the strains of Ravi Shankar's sitar.

#### GANESHA AT THE GATES

At the time of the 1970 census, six thousand Indian immigrants had settled in New York City. By 1990 the number had grown to ninety-four thousand; by 2000, the number was one hundred seventy thousand.<sup>21</sup> In Flushing, Queens, stands the first temple Hindus built in the U.S. from the ground up, the great Hindu temple formally called the Sri Maha Vallabha Ganapati Devasthanam. The temple is dedicated to Lord Ganesha, also known as Ganapati, the portly, elephant-headed god who sits above the doorway of homes and temples as the remover of obstacles and the lord of new beginnings. As the temple brochure puts it, "Everything in Hinduism begins with the worship of Ganesha." So it is fitting that this temple is dedicated to him.

It would be safe to say that all Hindus love Ganesha. They make a place for him in their home shrines and at the doorways of their temples, where he guards the threshold into sacred space. They worship Ganesha at the beginning of every ritual, at the outset of every wedding, at the launching of a business deal, at the outset of a journey, or on the first day of the school year. Why does he have an elephant head? According to one version of the story in Hindu mythology, Ganesha was created by the goddess Parvati from her own body and set to guard her doorway as she bathed. When Lord Shiva, her divine husband, came home and demanded entry, Ganesha obediently and bravely refused. A terrific battle ensued,

and Ganesha lost his head. When Parvati saw what had happened, she was distraught, and Shiva, chagrined. He set off to replace the boy's head with another. The first candidate he found for this emergency surgery was an elephant, and so it is that Ganesha has the head of an elephant.

Like every temple in India, the Queens temple has a founding story. One of the men responsible for the project, Dr. Alagappa Alagappan, reports that he had a vision. The astral form of an ancient Indian sage named Agastya told Alagappan that Lord Ganesha would take up residence in the city of New York. The temple of Ganesha would become a bridge between India and America, bringing scholars, priests, artists, and musicians to the U.S. and initiating a movement of temple building on the American continent. There was one final, intriguing point to the vision: Agastya told him that one day in the distant future, when the waters rise up to Ganesha's waist, Ganesha would save New York City from a great disaster. This, of course, remains to be seen.

With this commission, Dr. Alagappan organized and formally established the Hindu Temple Society of North America on January 26, 1970, India's Republic Day. More than seven years of hard work later, America's first Ganesha Temple was dedicated on July 4, 1977, America's Independence Day. A bridge in time was created between the two great independent democracies, and every year the Ganesha temple community celebrates its founding day on the Fourth of July. It is fitting that the image of Ganesha was one of the first to be duly consecrated in the U.S. and to be placed at the eastern gateway of America in New York City.

The Ganesha Temple has now become an important hub for the Hindu communities of the Northeast. The annual Ganesha Chaturthi—the celebration of Ganesha's birthday in late August or early September—is now a tradition in Flushing. During the nine-day festival more than ten thousand people come to the temple. Their rituals eloquently express their love for Ganesha. They donate 108 conch shells, they recite 100,000 mantras of Ganesha, and they decorate the great granite image of Ganesha in the central sanctum of the temple with flowers, sandal paste, and pearls. For the children, there is a children's *puja* in which the temple's youngsters sit in the sanctuary with plates of offerings before them. They learn how to proffer the flowers, lights, water, and incense to Lord Ganesha.

The highlight of the festival is the Ratha Yatra, when the processional image of Ganesha, a portable duplicate of the great granite image in the temple, is taken out of the temple for a chariot pilgrimage through

the streets. The people place Ganesha on the chariot, decorated to be a portable temple, and pull the chariot through the streets of Flushing. Musicians take the lead, playing the reedy instrument called the *nadaswaram*. Devotees by the hundreds lend a hand to pull the Lord's chariot by its long ropes. There is dancing and chanting, the singing of devotional *bhajans*, all along the parade route. "It's difficult to believe we're not in India!" exclaim participants. Yet for the children who skip along with the procession in excitement, this festival has no association with India but is squarely a part of the America they know.

On this same festival day across the continent on San Francisco Bay is another famous Ganesha procession. Many new American Hindus who have come from Gujarat and Maharashtra in western India used to celebrate Ganesha Chaturthi back home by honoring temporary, finely made clay images of Ganesha in their homes and neighborhoods. At the end of this time, the clay images are returned to a body of water—the sea or a river—which is the proper way to dispose of an image that has once been the temporary focus of worship. Back home in India at the conclusion of Ganesha Chaturthi, there are great processions in which worshipers bring hundreds of images of Ganesha from neighborhood and temple shrines to the seacoast for the rite of immersion, called *visarjana*. In 1991 Hindus from all over the San Francisco Bay area launched this tradition in America. Gathering at the Baker Beach parking lot, they formed a parade with their painted clay images of Ganesha, carrying them to an artillery site in the old Presidio that they had converted into a temple for the occasion. They broke coconuts at the feet of Ganesha and then immersed the images—all biodegradable—in San Francisco Bay. For the first time in history, the mayor of San Francisco issued a proclamation declaring the date, September 22, 1991, Golden Gate Ganesha Visarjana Day. The reporter from *India Abroad* wrote, "It is believed to be the first time that a mayor of a city in the United States has honored the Hindu deity."<sup>22</sup>

Ganesha is found in almost every American Hindu temple, and in some temples he is the central deity. When the diverse Hindu community of Nashville set out to build a temple in the western suburbs of the city, it took a vote as to which deity should occupy the central sanctum. It was a truly American solution to the inevitably difficult problem of negotiating so many Hindu differences in the creation of a single house of worship. Ganesha won by a landslide, and today he presides in the elegant marble sanctuary of the temple, balancing a row of Shaiva shrines on one side of the hall and Vaishnava shrines on the other. When I first visited

the temple in 1995, a warm and articulate woman from the temple community accompanied me and explained to me what she no doubt says to the temple's countless visitors, from schoolchildren to elder-hostel tourists: "Ganesha is the aspect of the Supreme Being responsible for the removal of obstacles, both in a practical sense and in a spiritual sense. On the spiritual path, our obstacles might be our weaknesses or our ego. When we pray to Ganesha, we ask him to help remove those obstacles within the self." She told the story of Shiva and Parvati and the elephant's head but then went on, "But for me, I think that when Hindus long ago imagined the divine form who would remove obstacles from the path, it is natural that they saw the mighty elephant as such a form." She has clearly developed a symbolic, spiritualized explanation of the gods and myths of India, which makes an effort to bridge the gap of culture and tradition separating the temple life of Hindu immigrants from the suburban life of their American neighbors.

The immense interpretive task that falls to Hindus in America cannot be underestimated. The introduction of Hindu temple culture in late-twentieth-century America is comparable in importance to the introduction of Hindu ideas by Swami Vivekananda in the late nineteenth century—but very different. A century ago the seeds of Vedanta and Yoga, which have always claimed a universal applicability, were transplanted and grew to have a wide appeal in the American context. But today we are seeing the transplanting of a more particular idiom of Hindu worship, liturgy, art, and symbol, hitherto rooted primarily in the cultural soil of India and the places of the Hindu diaspora—in East Africa, Trinidad, Malaysia, and Fiji. The first fruits of this transplanting are America's new Hindu temples—with their finely proportioned architecture, their intricate ornamentation, their exquisitely rendered images of the gods, and the elaborate ritual culture of Hinduism. Americans now encounter, not just the ideas of Hindu philosophy, but the many gods of the Hindu kaleidoscope and the prolific ritual and artistic expression of Hindu life.

#### LORD OF THE MEETING RIVERS: PILGRIMAGE TO PITTSBURGH

India is a land of pilgrimage, where every village and hilltop has its story and every story its location somewhere in the sacred geography of the land. Visiting these sacred places, called *tirthas*, literally, "crossing places," is one of the most dynamic forms of religious life in Hindu India. These *tirthas* are



spiritual crossings where the river of this earthly life may be safely forded to the far shore of immortality. If we were to imagine *tirthas* in America, most of us would probably not think first of Pittsburgh, but in the late twentieth century it became one of America's premier places of Hindu pilgrimage.

Pilgrims to America from the very beginning have brought the places of their homeland with them. Plymouth and Boston, Cambridge and Salem, New York and New Orleans—all were place-names of the old world transcribed in the new. And, of course, for the Native peoples of America, the landscape has always been linked to their spiritual lives, from the Black Hills of South Dakota, sacred to the Lakota Sioux as the Paha Sapa, to the Medicine Wheel sites of the Plains Indians in the Bighorn Mountains of Montana, to the Kootenai Falls, sacred to the Kootenai Indians in western Montana. Like European immigrants, Hindus have brought the places of home to their new homes in America. But Hindu immigrants to America also share something of the strong Native American sensitivity to the inherent sacredness of the natural world. The places of India are charged with religious significance, and Hindus have brought that sense of sacred geography to America.

For instance, in Pittsburgh, the Allegheny, Ohio, and Monongahela Rivers join together, the confluence of rivers Hindus call a *sangam*. The most famous *sangam* in India is the juncture of the Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati Rivers at the ancient pilgrimage place known as Prayag, the modern Allahabad, where pilgrims come from all over India to bathe. Pittsburgh's *sangam* is not so holy, and there are no bathing rites in these waters, but the symbolism is important. An Indian American who had lived in Pittsburgh for over twenty years put it this way in our conversation: "We have come to love Pittsburgh because of these rivers. In India all of our holy places were built on the banks of rivers or at the place where rivers join." Then he laughed a bit and added, "Of course we don't bathe here in the rivers here in Pittsburgh, but the meeting rivers are still a reminder that this is an auspicious place."

The Sri Ventakteswara Temple in Pittsburgh duplicates an important pilgrimage shrine in India—the hilltop temple of Tirupati in southern India where Lord Vishnu dwells as Sri Ventakeswara, known lovingly as Balaji. In Pittsburgh, Hindus also chose a hilltop for their temple. They started to build in the Penn Hills about the same time as the temple builders in New York City. "The environment was supposed to be very carefully selected," said Mrs. Rajshri Gopal, one of the leaders of the Pittsburgh temple, as we sat in her Pittsburgh home. She was eager to talk

about how the site was selected. “Most of the ancient temples are on river-banks or seashores or peaks of mountains. A beautiful environment was supposed to have a very beneficial effect on the mind. So we did select a mountain, here in Pennsylvania. When we did the testing for mines, we could not build on the summit, but we built as close to the peak as possible. We built on the slope, and this actually proved later to be an added attraction because the backdrop of the green trees behind the white temple makes it like a gem studded in the emerald hills of Pennsylvania.”

When the Sri Ventakeswara Temple first opened in 1977, just a month before the New York temple, it immediately attracted Hindu visitors. For most of the 1980s, more than twenty thousand visitors a year were recorded, coming from all over the country. Today, Hindu pilgrimage traffic in America is more diffuse. The Pittsburgh temple retains a kind of preeminence, but temples dedicated to Sri Venkateswara have also been built in DuPage County, west of Chicago; in the Malibu hills north of Los Angeles; and in Milwaukee.

Vasudha Narayana, a scholar of Hinduism at the University of Florida who is originally from South India, has studied the creation of new ritual forms and new devotional songs (*bhajans*) in the communities of Hindu America. In Pittsburgh, for example, she discovered a temple cassette of *bhajans* that includes one with the refrain, “Victory to Govinda, who lives in America, Govinda who with Radha resides in Penn Hills!”<sup>23</sup> Govinda is one of the names of Krishna, also a name of Sri Venkateswara. Radha, of course, is his beloved. The two are praised here as residents of the Penn Hills.

Indians often transpose and duplicate sacred spaces to make them more available to people far away from the original sites. For example, the city I first studied in India, the sacred city of Varanasi, also called Banaras and known to Hindus as Kashi, is duplicated north, south, east, and west in India. The Kashi of the North is in the Himalayas, and the Kashi of the South in Tamil Nadu. Thus, the fruits of a pilgrimage to a city far off can be claimed in a place much closer at hand. Today, the Kashi I knew so well on the Ganges in India can be found spiritually duplicated in Flint, Michigan, where Lord Shiva is worshiped in the Paschimakasi temple—the “Kashi of the West.” And Kashi can also be found in Sebastian, Florida, where the American guru Ma Jaya and her followers have created Kashi Ashram, a community dedicated to service on the banks of their own Ganges River.

Now in America, Hindus are fast developing a whole set of temples and sites that bring to these shores some of the most beloved sacred places of India. The temple of Sri Meenakshi in Houston specifically

transports the goddess of the holy city of Madurai in Tamil Nadu to Texas. The Divya Dham temple in Woodside, Queens, has created a replica of a powerful goddess shrine of northwest India, Vaishno Devi, located in a cave on a hilltop near Jammu and attracting hundreds of thousands of pilgrims yearly from across North India. In one corner of the Divya Dham, worshipers climb a set of stairs on an artificial hillock to enter into a cave chamber for the *darshan* of Vaishno Devi.

In rural Pennsylvania, a hand-painted sign points the way to Vraj, a name Hindus readily recognize as the homeland of Lord Krishna south of Delhi. Here, in the countryside near Schyukill Haven, a Krishna devotional movement has created its own Vraj. The stream that runs through the temple property has been named Yamuna, after the holy river that runs through the land of Vraj in India. Another part of Krishna's sacred homeland is duplicated near Austin, Texas, where Hindus have established a large temple complex called Barsana Dham, named for Barsana, the hometown of Radha, Krishna's beloved. As one of the Texas devotees wrote,

It is not possible for everyone to visit Vraj in India. For many people family and business commitments or economic considerations make travel to India difficult. With the Grace of Shree Swamiji, Barsana Dham has been established in Texas, U.S.A., where the same Divine-love vibrations of Vraj may be experienced by the devotees.<sup>24</sup>

To my mind, the most eclectic pilgrimage temple in the United States is the Shiva-Vishnu temple located in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., in Lanham, Maryland. I have traveled all over South India, visiting the many great temples associated with both the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions, and the many interior shrines of the Shiva-Vishnu temple in Lanham duplicate them all, reproducing virtually the entire sacred geography of South India from Tirupati to Trivandrum. Shortly before my visit, the pilgrimage to the hilltop called Shabarimalai in Kerala, the home of Lord Ayyappa, had been added to the site. In India, pilgrims visit this temple by undertaking the ascetic discipline of a long foot journey through the forest, chanting, "Swamiye Ayyappa!" as they ascend the steep hill. At the very end of the journey, they climb a set of eighteen sacred steps to the temple. Here in suburban Maryland, the eighteen steps are also replicated, bringing pilgrims to the shrine of America's Ayyappa, chanting, "Swamiye Ayyappa!"

As a native of Montana, I have often marveled on my visits to

Yellowstone Park how we in America have tended to set aside parks, build boardwalks around the geysers, and create lookouts for a vista of a beautiful mountain range or waterfall, whereas Hindus would have constructed wayside shrines or built temples. Our *darshan* is in the form of snapshots, and we come to gaze, or perhaps we come for general spiritual refreshment, but we usually do not come to worship. In Hindu India, on the other hand, the natural beauty of nature is one of many reasons a place may gain spiritual luster. In Hawaii, a temple is being built on a site near the Wailua River on the island of Kauai, where Swami Sivaya Subramuniaswami had a vision of Shiva. Kauai is a place of spectacular natural beauty that Native Hawaiians called Pihanakalani, "Where Heaven Touches Earth." A natural six-sided crystal, weighing seven hundred pounds, discovered in Arkansas, has been brought to be installed in the San Marga Iraivan Temple there as a rare and healing manifestation of the Shiva *linga*. Tons of granite stones destined for the temple are being carved near Bangalore in a village of some seventy-five craftsmen and their families. In the next few years they will be transported to Kauai, and the temple will be erected at this new site of pilgrimage in Hawaii.

Consecrating temples and divine images with the waters of American rivers has also added to the luster of the land of America. The waters of the Ganges are said to be a liquid form of divine energy, and they purify the waters of the Mississippi or the Hudson with which they are mixed in sacred rites. But these rivers too are beginning to be invoked in ritual prayers, their names recited in the Sanskrit prayers called *sankalpa*, prayers that locate the worshiper in the geographical context where he or she stands.

#### THE MICHIGAN MARRIAGE OF LORD RAMA

I was in Detroit for Rama Navami, the Hindu holiday celebrating Lord Rama. My Hindu host, Dr. T. K. Venkateswaran, gave me careful directions to the Bharatiya Temple in Troy, a leafy northern suburb of the city. For two days I had been plying the streets of Detroit visiting mosques and Islamic centers. But as I drove into Troy for the Hindu festival, I was in another world, the one created in the aftermath of the terrible Detroit riots of 1968 as urbanites fled to the suburbs. It almost seemed rural, with winding roads lined with trees, long driveways leading to private homes, and only an occasional stoplight. I found the temple and turned off the road toward a wooded hillside.

The Bharatiya Temple is intentionally pan-Hindu. It is not built in either North or South Indian style but is rather a temple of modern design, with only the scalloped arches at the entryway gesturing toward Indian architectural elements. Mr. Venkateswaran greeted me and showed me around. The first thing I noticed was the “mud room.” This was the first American temple I had seen, and by now I had seen dozens, where the removal of shoes and coats had been incorporated in the architectural design. The ritual architects from India simply didn’t think of it, and temples like the Sri Lakshmi temple in Boston struggled for years with piles of shoes, boots, and coats and nowhere to put them. Here, in a muddy mid-March, I was happy to find a superb cloakroom, with benches to sit on and remove shoes, cubbyholes in which to place them, and hooks for the hanging of coats.

The community was gathering in the temple sanctuary, a large carpeted room with four soaring wooden trusses supporting the roof. Ample windows and skylights brought the natural light of the late afternoon into the sanctuary. A broad raised platform at one end of the room served as the altar area. There was no fixed *sanctum sanctorum* for any of the deities; rather, they could be placed on a central altar table as the occasion required. That day Lord Rama was center stage on the altar, for this was celebrated as the day the Lord Vishnu became manifest on earth in the human incarnation of Rama. While it was a birthday, it was also celebrated as the wedding day of Rama and his bride, Sita, so she too was on the altar next to Rama.

The story of Rama’s life is well known in Hindu communities like this one: his miraculous birth as the prince of the kingdom of Ayodhya, his heroic youthful years, his marriage to the princess Sita, their tragic exile from Ayodhya, and their sojourn in the forest. Hindus know by heart how Sita was suddenly kidnapped by the demon Ravana and how the divine monkey Hanuman came to Rama’s aid to try to find her. Hanuman, son of Lord Shiva and son of the Wind, became the invaluable accomplice, servant, and devotee of Rama. All this was told in the Sanskrit Ramayana more than two thousand years ago and retold many times in the vernacular languages of India.

As the celebration began, I joined more than three hundred people seated on the carpeted floor in the sanctuary for the Wedding of Rama and Sita, a ritual enactment particularly popular in South India. The priests sat cross-legged next to the small granite images of Rama, who was dressed in a yellow silk dhoti, and of Sita, dressed in a red silk sari and pearls. The two families who were the sponsors of the rite were also seated



at the altar. They were, I learned, representing the families of Rama and Sita at their wedding. One of the most auspicious moments of the wedding is called the “Gift of the Daughter” (*kanyadana*), when the bride’s father makes the greatest gift of all: his own daughter to the groom’s family. Nothing on earth is harder to give away than one’s own child, and nothing gives more blessings than this gift. In every Hindu wedding, this is, for me, a moment of dissonance with my own feminist consciousness and a moment of poignant awareness that in Hindu traditions daughters are said to be born for someone else’s family. In this Michigan wedding, the priest did something unusual. He asked the whole congregation to join in repeating the words, “I make the gift of my daughter in marriage, *kanyadanam aham karishye*.” Then a member of the groom’s family, acting in Rama’s behalf, placed a necklace called a *mangala sutra* over the head of Sita. It is a symbolic marker of marriage, like the wedding ring. In many Hindu weddings, the giving of the *mangala sutra* is said to recall this very moment in the wedding of the ideal divine couple, Rama and Sita.

As the wedding concluded, the priest again asked the whole congregation to join in prayer. “Please pray if your daughter or son is of the age to get married,” he began. A deep and prayerful silence fell across the hall. “Pray that they will get a good match and will enjoy the blessings of a good marriage.” This brief prayer was clearly heartfelt, for these Indian immigrant parents who have chosen to settle in Detroit are uncertain what it will mean for their children and grandchildren. For most, a “good marriage” means to a Hindu young man or woman hailing from their own strata and part of India, but here in the United States, most will be grateful for a good marriage to any young Hindu man or woman. The intermarriage rate among Indian Americans is high. As I sat at Rama and Sita’s wedding in Detroit, I could not help thinking of my friends in Pittsburgh and in Louisville, both active in founding temples and both graciously accepting the reality that their own daughters married non-Hindu Americans.

When the wedding was over, the whole congregation adjourned to the adjacent community hall, a large auditorium with a full-fledged stage. We settled into our seats, and the program began—greetings, dance and musical numbers, and an impromptu talk I was asked to give on my research on Hindu temples. The final act was unforgettable. The junior high group of the Hindu Heritage class had written and rehearsed a play called *Hanuman Meets Superman*, which was the hit of the evening’s cultural program.

As the play opened, young Arun Mehta came onstage dressed in a fine Hanuman costume, his long monkey tail flowing behind him. Then



entered Mohan Kapur as Superman, with the S logo on his chest. A hip teenage gang gathered at the microphone, looking at the two heroes. “What is really the difference between Hanuman and Superman?” one of the boys asked. A girl volunteered, “Hanuman can move with the speed of wind. After all, he is the Son of the Wind. He leapt to the island of Lanka to find Sita. He flew to the Himalayas in the heat of battle to get a mountain of healing herbs for Rama’s dying army.”

“But Superman can move with speed through the air, too,” countered another. “‘Faster than a speeding bullet,’ you know what they say.”

“Well, Hanuman has amazing strength. After all, when he couldn’t figure out which healing herbs to pick for Rama, he just picked up the whole mountain of herbs and brought it to Lord Rama.”

“But, Superman is awesome too. He leaps tall buildings in a single bound.”

Back and forth they went, comparing the heroes. Finally, the youngest in the group, stretched on his tiptoes, barely able to reach the microphone, cried, “Wait! I know one thing Hanuman has that Superman doesn’t have! He has Lord Rama in his heart!” And sure enough, Hanuman knelt and tore open his chest to reveal the presence of Rama and Sita in his heart. More than his strength, more than his speed, more than his heroism, it is this—his love for the Lord—that has made Hanuman who he is.

The celebration of Rama Navami came to a close. The divine marriage was completed. The talent show concluded in the auditorium, and the whole community gathered for a supper of rice and curry dishes, mango chutneys and lemon pickles, with water tumblers on every table bearing the insignia of the Detroit Tigers. On this day I had seen a new phase of assimilation. This temple did not maintain the cultural distance that is distinctive of many of America’s big South Indian temples, where the Sanskrit liturgies are extensive and the young people too often flee to the parking lots with their Frisbees. Here a new space had been created where Hindu immigrants could experiment with the work of building a new culture. Hindus of all ages were involved, and imaginative, creative bridge building had taken place to link the ritual and mythic world of Hindu India and the suburban world of Detroit, Michigan.

#### FIRST HOLI IN NEW JERSEY

On Washington Road in Sayreville, New Jersey, just past the Dupont Laboratories and Our Lady of Victory Knights of Columbus Hall, is a

temple dedicated to Lord Krishna as the divine child. It is an important stop on our journey, for it gives us a real sense of the intensity of devotion and love that Hindus sum up with the term *bhakti*, which means the love of God. The temple began in anything but an atmosphere of love, however. It was opened in 1994 in a former YMCA building after years of community resistance and a court case. The temple-to-be had been defaced with the words, "Get Out Hindoos! KKK!" But the days of ugliness and contention seemed to be over when I first visited the temple. It was the springtime of 1995, and the old Y had been freshly painted a pale pink. The name Dwarakadish Temple appeared boldly on the signboard. I left my shoes in the rack outside the door and entered a large room with a carpeted floor.

At one end the curtain was drawn before the shrine, and presumably young Krishna was within. Temples in this Hindu community have *darshan*, the viewings of Krishna, six times a day. Devotees will say, "We take *darshan*, and Krishna gives *darshan*." For them, beholding Krishna is, indeed, a gift, and I recalled the great anticipation of *darshan* in the temples of this community in India and the palpable delight people expressed as the curtain was drawn back for Krishna to be revealed. At the other end of the room sat a cluster of women, chatting in a mixture of Gujarati and English and participating in what they called the *seva*, or "service," of Krishna. One was making a fresh flower garland that Krishna would wear at the next *darshan*. Two other women were sewing, making the tiny clothes that Krishna would wear during *darshan*, especially at the *shringara darshan* in the midmorning, when Krishna is dressed for the day.

Here Krishna is worshiped especially as a child. One of the many tastes of human love Hindus use to describe, by analogy, our love of God is the unconditional love parents have for their children. At Krishna Janmashtami, the festival of Krishna's birth in the late summer, they tell the story of how Krishna was born in the city of Mathura in North India. He was born in prison to his mother, Devaki, and father, Vasudeva, locked up by the wicked King Kamsa when he learned that their child would grow up to conquer Kamsa's kingdom. But when the baby was born, Vasudeva was miraculously able to steal out of prison. The door was unlocked, the guards were asleep, and Vasudeva took baby Krishna through the flooding waters of the Yamuna River to a village on the other side. There he placed him in the foster care of two simple villagers, Nanda and Yashoda, who raised Krishna as their own. The stories of

Krishna found in the Bhagavata Purana tell of his childhood as a mischievous and lovable baby, his boyhood as a hero and companion to his village friends, and his life as the sweetest, most playful, and most passionate lover of the *gopīs*, or milkmaids, of Vraj.

Here in Sayreville at the Dwarakadish Temple it is his childhood with Nanda and Yashoda that is especially remembered.<sup>25</sup> “This is Nanda Baba’s house,” explained one of the women as she stitched away. “When we come to the temple, we say in our hearts that it is going to Nanda Baba’s house, where Krishna lived as a child.” The bell rang for the 5:15 evening *darshan*. The temple room had begun to fill with people stopping by after work. By the time of the next *darshan* from 6:30 to 7:30, just before Krishna retires to bed, the room would be completely full. The women stood at the altar rail, hands pressed together in a gesture of greeting, honor, and prayer as the curtain was pulled back. “Jai Shri Krishna!” they exclaimed as they received his *darshan*.

The black image has four arms and bears the traditional emblems of Krishna—the club, the conch, the discus.<sup>26</sup> This image of Krishna, now elaborately decked with clothing, garlands, and necklaces, is the permanent, consecrated one. At his feet, however, is a smaller metal image of Krishna as the child, endearingly called Lalji. It is this fully consecrated image that is moved from place to place during the day, duplicating the presence of Krishna in the larger image. In this form Krishna is taken from the altar into the back chamber of the temple at bedtime, is awakened in the morning, is brought once again to the altar for *darshan*, and is moved at special times into the swing next to the altar to enjoy the pleasures of swinging.

The religious feeling, called *bhava*, that is nurtured here is that of the spontaneous, tender love that parents have for their child. For the priests this a full-time job. They wake Krishna and put him to bed, they cook for Krishna, dress him, change his clothes 365 days a year. The priest explained, “The *bhava* I feel is of being both mother and father at once. I often think of myself, in this service, as Krishna’s mother, Yashoda.” Here in this temple, men and women take the raw materials of human emotion—the instinctual caretaking and loving of parents—and direct them toward God. The women who sit making garlands and sewing tiny clothes would laugh at the suggestion that the Supreme Lord actually needs these offerings, but we human beings need to refine and practice the arts of loving—even with the gods. Krishna’s presence in

this temple enables his devotees to do just that. "I moved to the U.S. in 1972," said one of the women. "There was no temple then, not really any community. I was so lonely. I used to cry every day. And now all this." She gestured with delight toward the altar and the fine image of Krishna. "Now we have a temple right here. I come every day for at least one *darshan*."

The springtime festival of Holi is popular in North India where it is celebrated with a Holika bonfire and the revelry of greeting one another with the red powder called *gulal*. For a few days, all social rules seem to be suspended while celebrants greet one another, streaking a smear of red *gulal* across each other's faces. The Holi festival in America is evolving. A few years ago *India Abroad* announced that a Maryland group held its Holi celebration in an Indian café in the mall, the Bihar Cultural Association of Chicago celebrated Holi at a hall in Skokie, and the Hindu Temple of Metropolitan Washington observed a Holi celebration in a local high school. There was even a gala Holi at the Trump Palace in Atlantic City. For the Hindus of Sayreville, New Jersey, however, the first real Holi was in 1995 at the newly completed Dwarakadish Temple. Having been through several jubilant Holi celebrations in India and emerged a multi-colored crimson-haired spectacle, I accepted the invitation to Holi with some trepidation.

A forty-five-minute drive out to Sayreville from Manhattan brought me to an already crowded temple, with the evening *darshan* of Lord Krishna about to begin. Some fifty women were singing the songs of Holi as a drummer kept the beat. A few of them began dancing to the lively rhythm. Suddenly the bright red *gulal* powder appeared. Someone must have pulled a small plastic packet surreptitiously from her pocket. At once a dozen people seemed to have their own supply. One woman took a fellow dancer by surprise and grazed her face with a streak of bright red. Before long pink puffs of powder hung in the temple air as the worshipers bestowed dots and streaks of *gulal* upon one another. "Jai Shri Krishna! Hail to Lord Krishna!" they cheered. Soon I too was emblazoned with a streak of red. Providentially, the carpets of the large sanctuary had been covered with bright blue plastic tarps. At 6:30 P.M., the bells announced the evening *darshan*. The doors to Krishna's inner sanctum were opened to show Lord Krishna, dressed for the holiday. The Holi play continued, with Krishna as a participant. The priests flung pinches of blue, green, red, and yellow powder on the image of Krishna. Then, in turn, and on

Krishna's behalf, they pitched handfuls of powder into the congregation, where all received it as a blessing.

Behind the temple in the parking lot, the teenagers of the Hindu community, delighted with the celebration and covered with color, had kindled a huge bonfire, called the Holika fire. It is said to burn the symbolic demoness, Holika, who had tried unsuccessfully to destroy young Krishna. The young people careened around the fire, bestowing "Happy Holi!" greetings of red. A swelling crowd of red-faced revelers streamed from the rites inside the temple and joined them, circling the fire in dance and song. For many of these revelers, this was not only the first Holi here in the Dwarakadish Temple, but their first real Holi in America, bonfire and all. The rented halls and temporary dwellings of the community had never been the right place for such a celebration. The fire of Holi also marked a kind of new year, consuming things of the past and starting afresh. That night the bonfire crackled with the popping of grains thrown into it as auguries of a new season of life. Clearly a new season was beginning for the Hindu devotees of Krishna in New Jersey.

I left the celebrations late that night, and as I peeked at myself in the rearview mirror, I realized just what a wild sight I was. My entire face was red, with a few dots of green and blue, and my long hair was a brilliant lion's mane, given body by red powder and the smoke of the fire. I made my way to the New Jersey turnpike and assured the startled keeper of the first toll booth that I was fine. The parking lot attendant in Manhattan where I was staying was completely blasé. I passed dozens of people as I walked toward the place I was staying and greeted the doorman, who seemed unconcerned about my appearance. This was New York, I concluded, and people could clearly take Holi in their stride.

#### GROWING UP HINDU IN AMERICA

The first time I visited the beautiful temple of Sri Venkateswara, just over the hills from Malibu Beach, I was in the company of several members of my extended family. They were evangelical Christians, and I was not sure how they would respond to a Hindu temple, with its multitude of gods. The temple itself was breathtakingly beautiful, sitting on a hillside in Casabalsas, its white decorated towers rising amid a forest of green, woven with brilliant bougainvillea. We parked and approached the main gate of the temple, and as luck would have it, we arrived in the main sanctuary just as another family was arriving: a Hindu couple with a tiny baby.

The young couple and their small group of family members approached the priest who was officiating at the sanctum of Vishnu, here present as Sri Venkateswara. They presented two plastic bags, bulging with fruit to be offered in the service of worship. As we waited before the sanctum for the *puja* to begin, the young man explained to me that this was the three-week-old baby's first outing. Here, as in India, it is often the custom that the mother and child do not go out or visit in people's homes for a certain period of time after the baby is born. The first real outing of mother and newborn baby is traditionally to the temple, and so they had come that day. Even fifteen years ago, this ritual first journey to the temple would not have been easy, perhaps not even possible, in most American cities.

We stood a few steps behind this family as the *puja* began. As each offering was made—the water, the flowers, the fruit, the oil lamp—it was returned as God's grace to bless the couple and their baby and the rest of us as well. No ritual could have created a more readily accessible bridge to Hindu life for my family members. They beamed with delight at the blessing of this newborn and felt honored to be witnesses of this event. When the fruits were returned, blessed by Vishnu, they did not hesitate to receive the bananas and apples, which now seemed to link our family and theirs. There were many things they found perplexing and alien as we continued our tour of the temple, but this ritual blessing had established a common ground of humanity that set everything else in perspective.

Rites of passage in the Hindu tradition are called *samskaras*, those rites that shape and perfect human life. They begin with prenatal rites, then rites of birth and childhood, such as the name giving we saw in Livermore. There are rites that accompany the first outing, as we saw in the Malibu hills, rites that accompany the child's first solid food and the first learning of the alphabet, and so on. Among the most important, for boys, is the *upanayana*, in which a young boy in his early teens is brought to a guru or teacher to begin his religious education. He receives the sacred thread worn by men of the three upper castes in traditional India and receives the mantras and instruction that will guide him in a life of sacred learning.

I attended the *upanayana* of two young cousins, Tejas and Shridhar, one Sunday morning in Bridgewater, New Jersey. It took place not in the temple sanctuary but in the large adjoining auditorium. There more than two hundred family and friends gathered to witness this rite of passage, as they might gather at a nearby synagogue for a bar or bat mitzvah. The event began with a meal, which the boys shared with their mothers, in former times marking the last such meal they would share with the



women of the household. In the long series of rites that followed, the boys signified their readiness for what lay ahead by standing on a stone slab, symbolic of the firmness of resolve that must accompany a life of learning. Each received the sacred thread, a white three-stranded cord that was tied by the father and the guru around the boy's chest, over the right shoulder, and under the left arm. They will wear this sacred thread for the rest of their lives. Toward the end of the ceremony, the whole assembled family was called to attention for the Brahmopadesha, the receiving of the sacred teachings. The teaching took place under the cover of a white silk cloth, a kind of womb of rebirth, where the guru, the father, and the mother gave the initiate the mantra that marks his spiritual adulthood. This is the Gayatri mantra, said to symbolize the wisdom of the whole tradition.

I found the ritual symmetry of the rite moving. The initiates began the morning as boys, fed by their mothers, and ended the morning as new students of sacred wisdom, symbolically setting off from home. As such, they had to learn to beg for alms. Holding their alms dishes, the boys practiced by trying it out for the first time on the most likely donors—their own mothers, who responded generously with rice and sweets. At the conclusion, everyone in the assembly blessed the boys by throwing upon them handfuls of yellow flower petals and rice grains.

In America today, the temple is the locus of many life-cycle rites, even those that might normally be performed at home in the Indian context. And today American temples are inventively creating the kind of temple life that will enable young people, like Tejas and Shridhar, to grow up in a temple, with the attendant forms of education and rites of passage. In India, with its multitude of temples and its more assimilative environment for learning Hindu practice and traditions, there is little precedent for the deliberate forms of temple life that have begun to take root in the U.S. Hindu temples here are evolving dozens of new forms to meet the challenges of a new society. Traditional rites of passage may be supplemented with new ritual forms, such as Graduation Puja for high school seniors or Mother's Day Puja for children to honor their mothers on Mother's Day.

New forms of Hindu instruction are also coming into being in the U.S., and with them new and more systematic formulations of Hinduism. At the Hindu Temple Society of Greater Chicago in Lemont, Illinois, the youth program called "In the Wings" brings young people together for weekend classes and summer camps to enjoy one another's company and learn about their tradition. In Boston, the Shishu Bharati School brings

Hindu children and their families together at an elementary school each Sunday for classes. Hindu Heritage classes abound in temples all over the country, some with makeshift curricula and others using materials that are being explicitly produced to teach Hinduism in the West. For example, Swami Dayananda and his staff at the Arsha Vidya Gurukula retreat center in Pennsylvania have developed a Vedic Heritage curriculum—with both student workbooks and teacher's guides. The Saiva Siddhanta curriculum of the Himalayan Institute, based in Hawaii and California, has modeled its study around the family home-study programs of the Mormons, complete with discussion questions and multiple-choice test questions. What is fascinating about these developments is the attempt to systematize and codify a tradition that for over three thousand years has proliferated into so many forms as to defy simplification. What is being worked out, in the American context, is not so much the reclaiming of ancient traditions but the creation of a new emergent form of Hinduism.

While the first generation of Hindu immigrants has learned to negotiate a new American identity through the process of community formation and temple building, the second generation faces new challenges, among them to identify what parts of the Hindu tradition they will claim for themselves and what parts they will let go. The American-born baby presented for blessings at the temple, surrounded by Indian-born parents and family members, will likely grow up in Los Angeles and attend grade school and high school there. Boys like Tejas and Sridhar will finish high school and go off to college. Their lives will be lived in the complex American contexts of race, religion, culture, and politics. At every step of the way, these youngsters will be weaving a new pattern of Hindu life that will include the traditionally Hindu, the overwhelmingly American, and their own wholly new creations.

A photo album of America's second-generation Hindus will include snapshots of traditional rites, like the hundreds of photos taken at the *upanayana* of Tejas and Sridhar. It will also include new images that may puzzle those back home in India. The high school youth group at the Hindu Temple in Minneapolis poses in the snow on their ski trip. A few months later they stand in the temple in cap and gown for their Graduation Puja. In Boston, the youth group strides along a parkway, participating in the Walk for Hunger. In Michigan, a chapter of the Hindu Students Council stands with garbage bags beside the section of the public highway they have signed up to maintain. The photo album also includes many images of summer camps. At the Pittsburgh temple

camp at Slippery Rock Community College, the junior high group strikes a pose from the play of the Ramayana they are producing. At the Chinmaya Mission camp in North Andover, Massachusetts, campers paint T-shirts with images of Ganesha. At a Hindu Students Council camp in New Jersey, college students sing *bhajans* around a campfire. And there will be photos of marriages. A young man from a Vermont Protestant background rides a white horse up the hill to the Pittsburgh temple, where he will marry a Hindu woman at the sacred fire-altar. The next week, a young Hindu woman from Pittsburgh poses with her groom at a white Protestant church in Vermont. These photos will find their way into family albums in both India and America. Some will be displayed on Web sites and printed in temple newsletters. What they present to us is a complex picture of the multitude of ways in which new moments of cultural creation have taken place.

#### ONE HUNDRED YEARS LATER . . .

Pulling off Highway 101, which winds through the Poconos into Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, I found a Sunday flea market set up in a large field. Booths had been set up selling blue bottles, canoe paddles, lamps, quilts, used books, and Confederate flags. But across the road, in a grove of tall pines, was the place I was looking for, Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, "Wisdom of the Sages School," roughly translated, where a week-long Hindu family camp was getting under way. The flea-market folks were going about their business unaware of what was happening on the margins of their Sunday encampment, just as most Americans are unaware of the new life on the margins of a familiar culture. What was happening across the road is typical of the new life that is changing America forever.

Just a hundred feet from the road under the pines was a cluster of summer cabins and an open meadow where American-born Hindu teenagers were throwing a football. A beautiful new Hindu temple was secluded in the pines, with attached kitchen and dining hall to accommodate campers. Here the negotiation of old and new, Indian and American, first- and second-generation, was in full swing.

I arrived just in time for the opening session. A Hindu swami in traditional orange robes was speaking to a group of summer campers on the subject of *viveka*, "discrimination," in Hindu philosophy. The temple room where we were all seated was a peaceful space, the high arched ceiling supported with wooden trusses, with floor-to-ceiling windows along the

walls. The whole room was covered with soft blue carpeting and spread with floor cushions and backrests for the small congregation of forty or so who had gathered. They were middle-aged men and women, with pullover sweaters and reading glasses. For many of the professionals among them, this week of Vedanta in the Poconos *was* their summer vacation. They opened their loose-leaf texts, containing the text of the *Tattva Viveka* in Sanskrit and English. They begin with a prayer for understanding:

Om. May He indeed protect both of us. May He nourish both of us. May we together acquire the capacity to study and to understand. May our study be brilliant. May we not disagree with each other. Om, peace, peace, peace.

I found that Arsha Vidya holds frequent family camps—at Thanksgiving, at Christmas, and over the Fourth of July weekend, creating a Hindu context for the great days of the American calendar. Youth camps for high school and college students take place in summer, and for adults there are Vedanta camps to study a particular text and stress-management camps for busy professionals. This camp is but one knot in a web of new sites where American Hindu life is now being created all across the country, and perhaps it is a good place to conclude our own journey.

More than one hundred years after Swami Vivekananda planted the seeds of Vedanta in American cities, the Hindu tradition has truly taken root in America—and in ways Vivekananda could not have imagined. Were he to return to the U.S. today, Vivekananda would be pleased to find these Indian professionals studying Vedanta under the pines in Pennsylvania, and he would recognize the forms of their study and practice. But traveling across America today, he would be astonished at the array of Hindu life he would find here. He would find Bengalis from his own part of India gathering for summer picnics in Boston and Telugu speakers from the South gathering for summer conventions. He would find practitioners of Indian Ayurvedic medicine in Seattle and yoga classes in hundreds of health clubs. He would find a temple youth choir learning Sanskrit chants and Hindi devotional songs in suburban Maryland and a group of zealous devotees singing the Hindi Ramayana straight through in Chicago. He would see the procession of Lord Ganesha through the streets of New York and the celebration of Krishna's birthday in a huge convention center in Houston. Were he to return to Harvard, where he lectured in the 1890s, he would find students

crowding into a gaily decorated dorm room for the celebration of the Diwali Festival of Lights, he would hear the chanting of the Rig Veda at the baccalaureate of the senior class, and he would wonder, as we do, how these young people, destined for American life in public service, medicine, and science, will carry their tradition with them in the years ahead. A new and somehow American Hinduism is coming into being.

## NOTES

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24. Sushree Meera Devi, Barsana Dham, 1994.
25. The Dwarakadish Temple is named for the particular form of Krishna who is honored as the divine child in the hills of Rajasthan at the Pushti Marga temple in Kankroli.
26. These, of course, are also seen as the emblems of Vishnu or of any form of Vishnu. For the Pushti Margis, however, Krishna is the Supreme Lord.