A Nation of Religions

The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America

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Sacred Land, Sacred Service

Hindu Adaptations to the American Landscape

Hindus living in India have had the comfort and luxury of having their religion, ethnicity, and culture come together on the south Asian subcontinent. Religious concepts, philosophies, social relationships, and sacred geography are embedded in and articulated through the performing arts. Vegetables, lentils, and spices are connected with notions of orthopraxy. Every religious ritual framed by Brahmanical Sanskrit verses begins with a recitation of the geography of the sacred land in which the observant resides. But what happens when Hindus migrate to a different continent, removed from the sacred territories? How do they see themselves as connected with the new land they call home?

This chapter examines how post-1965 immigrant Hindus are accommodating to the United States in two important ways. The first is by transforming the land, in some cases making places in America sacred by associating them with Hindu geography and mythology. The second is by seizing on a quintessentially American activity—volunteerism—and making it a part of the individual Hindu's duty and the Hindu temple's mission. The American spiritual landscape plainly has been transformed by the addition of Hindu temples to a nation of church spires, synagogue domes, and mosque minarets. But the United States is also changing the Hindu tradition.

For several millennia, Hindus have considered the land of India to be sacred. They think of specific villages, mountains, lakes, and rivers as infused with holiness. In fact, several sacred texts strongly disapprove of living outside this sacred land. Nonetheless, Hindus have been migrating for more than two thousand years, first to southeast Asia and then to other parts of the world. Every migration has entailed negotiations between host cultures and the Hindus' heritage as they struggled to maintain their identity on foreign soil. Hindus' survival and success in any new country depends on their being recognized as part of the new landscape; Hinduism's success and survival

have depended on its creative ability to devise out of its large library of stories and memories a continuum of architecture that somehow fits in the new environment while remaining connected with the past. Several thousand years of sacred texts, commentaries, myths, stories, songs, dances, and symbols in Sanskrit as well as various vernacular and elite structures serve as a vast reservoir of resources from which Hindus can draw as they find ways to fit into American communities with different histories and different dreams. For example, in Sanskrit prologues to U.S. Hindu rituals, some Hindus now see America as a continent within the traditional mythical landscape of Hinduism; some Hindus have reinterpreted the American eagle as Garuda, the eagle vehicle of the Hindu god Vishnu; and some Hindus understand working in soup kitchens during the Martin Luther King Jr. weekend as participating in meritorious acts of food giving during the festival of Sankaranti, which falls close to the U.S. public holiday in mid-January.

While temple building has been an immediate imperative for newly settled U.S. Hindus, many Hindu immigrants to Europe set up spiritual shop in warehouses, garages, or the upper floors of shops and only later built more traditional temples. On this basis alone, Hinduism in the United States differs from Hinduism in other places (with the possible exception of Canada). In the United States, citizens are more open and accepting of immigrant customs and traditions. Here it is not considered archaic to go regularly to houses of worship. Religion is not state mandated. And economic institutions will lend money to build temples. So Hindu temples are rising all over the map. Depending on a community's means, these structures range from renovated airport hangars, gymnasiums, and Eastern Orthodox churches to majestic buildings with carved towers resembling eleventh-century south Indian temples. The United States has more Hindu temples than any country except India.

Literally thousands of songs and dances glorify India or speak of the sacrality of Indian land. Do Hindus in America think of themselves as being in exile and away from the holy land? Far from it.

Hindus have made portions of the United States sacred and to some extent contiguous with India in at least four ways: (1) by composing songs and pious Sanskrit prayers extolling the U.S. state in which a particular temple is located; (2) by adapting the classic cosmology of the Puranas to identify America as a specific *dvipa* (island/continent) mentioned in those sacred Sanskrit texts; (3) by physically consecrating the land with waters from a combination of sacred Indian rivers and American rivers; and (4) by literally re-creating in

U.S. locations the physical landscape of certain holy places in India. In addition, Hindus co-opt land or shrines held sacred by Americans, layering motifs and meanings on U.S. sacred spaces.

Many Hindu legal codes speak of parts of the Indian subcontinent as holy ground fit for religious rituals. Indeed, some of these codes say that all of India is holy; ritual actions bear fruit here. The description of the sacrality of the land was confined to the northern part of India, however, when some of the codes of righteousness (*dharma sastras*) were composed around the beginning of the Common Era. Manu says,

> That land, created by the gods, which lies between the two divine rivers Sarasvati and Drishadvati [is] Brahmavarta . . . the tract between those two mountains which extends between the eastern and western oceans, the wise call Aryavarta (the country of the noble ones). . . . The land where the black antelope naturally roams, one must know to be fit for the performance of sacrifices; [this land] is different from the country of the barbarians.[1]

In time, this concept extended beyond the land between the Himalaya and Vindhya Mountains to cover the whole subcontinent. India itself became a divine mother (Bharata Mata).

Now almost every village in India has a story of divine manifestation—a legend of a hierophany. In many parts of India, the name of one's village is part of one's official name. Families periodically trek back to their ancestral villages to worship the family deity; they frequently send money back to hometown temples in acts of mail-order piety.

Still, people from the subcontinent have been migrating to practically every part of the world since the early centuries of the Common Era. They settled and built temples in many places, including the grand monuments of southeast Asia. But immigrants to the United States have had several advantages that their ancestors did not have. At least after 1965, U.S. immigrants enjoyed economic prosperity and with it the luxury of going back regularly to their mother country. They also enjoyed religious freedom, which they exercised first and foremost by building temples and raising their children in Indian religion and culture.

In 1986 the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Penn Hills, Pennsylvania, issued a cassette of popular devotional songs (*bhajans*). In it, the Pittsburgh-area devotees praise Lord Venkateswara (Lord of the Venkata Hills), a manifestation of Lord Vishnu:

America vasa jaya govinda
Penn Hills nilaya radhe govinda
sri guru jaya guru, vithala govinda

[Victory to Govinda who lives in America;
Govinda who with Radha resides in Penn Hills.
Victory to Govinda, Vithala, the sacred Teacher.][2]

This song hails Vishnu as Govinda (one of his many names). Glorifying Vishnu as abiding in a particular place is a way that devotees consecrate that deity in a temple and bring him or her alive. All temples conduct formal ceremonies of vivification with pitchers of sanctified waters, promulgating the sacredness of the land in song and making a particular deity accessible in a particular place. Thus, the deity Venkateswara is believed to be present in Tiru Venkatam in Tirupati, India. But this deity now also abides in local shrines at Penn Hills, Malibu, Chicago, Dayton, and Atlanta, among many others. The devotees in Pittsburgh believe that their lord resides with them, sanctifying the land where they live.

Singing about the deity in a particular location helps mark the sacrality of that spot. Thus, in the Sri Vaishnava tradition—an important faith and one of many Hindu communities—poet-saints who lived between the eighth and tenth centuries C.E. sang in praise of Vishnu in 108 places. They sang about the particular manifestation of Vishnu in a specific town or village and described the surroundings—the tall citadels, the terraced houses and palaces, the expanses of crops, the trees, the sea, and other relevant details of the landscape. These 108 sites are called the "divine places" (*divya desa*) and are hallowed in the Sri Vaishnava tradition. While other temples are also very prominent, they are not considered among these special 108 because the early poet-saints did not sing about these temples. Singing about a place, therefore, not only articulates its sacrality but makes it holy.

Understanding this context is crucial to any consideration of the popular song declaring "Victory to Govinda who lives in America" and of a more recent poem, "Sri Venkatesha America Vaibhava Stotram" (Praise of the Appearance of Lord Venkatesha in America). The latter is a stately piece of literature composed by Dr. J. Sethuraman, professor of statistics at Florida State University in Tallahassee and an erudite scholar of Sanskrit. Sethuraman's poem glorifies Lord Vishnu in his manifestation as Venkatesha (Venkateswara) in many American towns and states. Most Hindus in south India do not worship generic deities such as Vishnu and Lakshmi; instead, they call these gods

affectionately by the particular name by which they are known in a nearby temple. Venkatesha is a well known and popular manifestation of Vishnu, and the temple in Penn Hills is devoted to him. Sethuraman's poem describes the different places in the United States where Venkatesha is enshrined.

"Sri Venkatesha America Vaibhava Stotram" is written in classical Sanskrit, in the style of a traditional *kavya* (poem), replete with exquisite literary devices and ornate verses. It starts off with the idea that Sri Venkatesha (Vishnu), Lakshmi (the goddess of good fortune), and the Earth Goddess have come to America to remove the devotees' miseries. The poem then proceeds, using a time-honored Sanskrit literary strategy, to describe the characteristics of this Lord Venkatesha ("Such a Sri Venkatesha has arrived here."). The Venkatesha who has graced this country, says Sethuraman, is the supreme deity spoken of in the scriptures, the glorious one who is so hard to comprehend and reach. And yet, this majestic, supreme being (*brahman*), to make itself accessible, comes as Venkatesha with Lakshmi and the Goddess Earth to be close to his devotees: "Such a Sri Venkatesha has arrived here—the very Brahman—the one who has to be understood from the Vedas, and one with the brilliance of a thousand rising suns—in whom a large assembly of yogis have placed their minds . . . and are rejoicing day and night."[3] The poet or person who recites this prayer then places his soul at the feet of the Lord and seeks him as a refuge (9–16). The poet then glorifies this manifestation and the many incarnations of Vishnu (17–19). Then comes the "Description of the Grand Tour of Sri Venkatesha in America" (Sri Venkatesha Amerika Vaibhava Sthala Varnanam).

The first place to be glorified, the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh, is the first large temple in America devoted to Venkatesha. It is followed by New York (Flushing) and Boston. In each case, Sethuraman begins the relevant verses with the phrase, "Such a Venkatesha," harking back to the first verse introducing this deity. In a manner reminiscent of the best of the classical Indian poets, he describes the surroundings for every city and state. The first two verses offer a taste of his style, replete with "decorative" Sanskrit embellishments:

> Venkatesha, the ocean of nectar of kindness, has come to [the] hill top at the well known city of Pittsburgh, surrounded by the three rivers, Allegheny, Monongahela, and the Ohio, to remove the miseries of the people.
>
> Venkatesha, the ocean of nectar of kindness, has indeed come to the place known as Ashland, Massachusetts (near Boston) which is purified by the waves of the Atlantic ocean, to remove the miseries of the people.[4]

The refrain that this Venkatesha, "an ocean of the nectar of kindness," comes to "remove the miseries" of the people is repeated in the descriptions of twenty-one other places. The list grows when new temples to Venkatesha are added to the American map.

The descriptions are both generic and specific. The cold waves of the Pacific Ocean purify Malibu and San Diego, California; the forests on the banks of the great Mississippi River are near Jackson, Mississippi; and Dayton, Ohio, is purified by the Stillwater, Red, and the Great Miami Rivers. A special touch is added to Venkatesha's manifestation in Houston. This city is now well known among south Indian Hindus in America for its magnificent temple of Meenakshi (the local name of the Goddess Parvati in Madurai, south India). In south India, the popular imagination considers Meenakshi to be the sister of Vishnu. Thus, Sethuraman says that Venkatesha/Vishnu comes to Houston ("in the great state of Texas garlanded by the Rio Grande River") to be near his sister, Sri Meenakshi.

Sethuraman also renders some names in Sanskrit: the Pacific Ocean is called *santyabdi* (24, 25); the Stillwater River is *santambu nadi*, and the Red River is *sindura nadi* (34). Riverdale (near Atlanta) is translated as *nadisu tira* (29), and Bridgewater, New Jersey, is *setunira* (31). These geographic names thus become part of the Hindus' liturgical map. The poem also features several patterns of "ornamentation" that would delight the hearts of Sanskritists. The poem ends with a petition: the poet asks God to grant a calm mind, free of raging desires, to anyone who repeatedly thinks of all these divine residences (New York, Pittsburgh, Boston, and so forth), anyone who contemplates Venkatesha's divine form and praises him with this poem.

This poem makes sacred the towns and states of America where Vishnu has come to reside. India's villages and towns are sacred because the poets have glorified the supreme being who has come to reside there as a god or goddess. Now the same deity resides in America.

At the beginning of all traditional Hindu rituals (weddings, ancestral rites, naming ceremonies, and so on), the officiating priest and his attendants formally declare the coordinates of the land and the time in which the rite takes place. These words are part of the *sankalpa* (declaration of intention) to do the ritual. Such coordinates are in cosmic frameworks; the sacred space is identified with one of the *dvipas* in Puranic cosmology, and the sacred time is parsed in millions of years.

Classic statements of intention identify India as the most fortuitous of land masses—the Jambu Dvipa (Island of Rose-Apple Fruit) located to the south of

the mythical Mount Meru, which rises at the center of the universe. Hindu religious texts give a range of between four and thirteen for the number of such islands, which are located like the petals of a lotus flower around Mount Meru. The islands are said to be separated by oceans of water, milk, sugarcane juice, and so forth. The Bhagavata Purana, a text ascribed to the first millennium C.E., identifies seven such islands with the names of various subdivisions. In India, the performer of the ritual further specifies that he or she is in the "division of the world" (*varsha*) called Bhaarata in that "fragment" (*khanda*) of the land named Bharata. The Bhagavata Purana names nine *varshas*, or continents. No serious attempt seems to have been made in the past to identify any other actual continent or land mass with any of these traditional mythical names.

In summary, then, some of the Puranas give details of seven cosmic islands divided into various provinces. The sacred land of India is declared to be in the Island of Rose-Apple Fruit (Jambu Dvipa); the land mass is called Bhaarata (*bharata varsha*), and the country is Bharata (*bharata khanda*). The whole area is considered to be south of the mythical Mount Meru. Thus, Hindus in India begin almost all religious rituals with the intention to perform that rite, which includes the line, "in this Island of Rose-Apple Fruit, in the land of Bharata, in the fragment of land [country] called Bharata, south of Mount Meru [Jambu dvipe Bharata varshe bharata khande, Mero dakshine parsve]."

The rituals in the United States have new parameters and new names. Almost all temples (with the exception of the one in Buffalo, New York) follow the formulaic statement that America is located in the Krauncha (Heron) Island west of Mount Meru. While it is not clear where these phrases were first modified to fit North America, priests' accounts indicate that the change probably happened in the early temples in Pittsburgh and Queens, New York, around 1975. In the ritual intention stated in the Pittsburgh Venkateswara Temple, elaborated in the many temples of America, and repeated in the beginning of every wedding, death, or other ritual, a new cosmology is in place. We are no longer operating on the Rose-Apple Island; we are now in America, the Island of the Heron.

Krauncha is the fifth of the seven land masses in Hindu cosmology. Scholars do not agree on where Krauncha is located: some see it as purely mythical, some as another planet, some as another continent in this world, and others as a spiritual state. Nevertheless, the ritual specialists who composed the groundbreaking rites for the first temples in America came to call their new land Krauncha. According to the Vishnu Purana, a text composed in the first

few centuries of the Common Era, all the continents are insular; another text, the Bhagavata Purana (composed 100–600 C.E.), says that the Krauncha *dvipa* is surrounded by an ocean of milk and that it is free from fear because it is guarded by the god Varuna.[5]

There is some variation in the identification of both the continent and its subdivisions. In general, two versions prevail: Pittsburgh, Atlanta, and some others identify this land as the golden continent (*hiranyaka varsha*), and the temple is in the part called "the sacred place of cattle-herds" (*go tirtha khanda*). The word *tirtha* in Sanskrit indicates a holy place, a place of pilgrimage; use of the term for the American subcontinent asserts its sacrality.[6]

In the second version, used in Chicago, Jacksonville, and other places, America is described as the "delightful, pleasant" part (*ramanaka khanda*) of the "delightful" continent (*ramanaka varsha*), still in the island of Krauncha. Combinations of the two statements are seen in various parts of the United States, with minor variations. The second version also mentions the "sacred" rivers in the United States.

A declaration of intention in Tallahassee, Florida, began,

> In this island of Krauncha, in the delightful continent, in the sacred province of the cows that is west of the Mississippi River, in the sacred land [*punya kshetra*] called Tallahassee . . .[7]

In Jacksonville, Florida, by contrast, a fuller version of the declaration of intention was used:

> In the Krauncha island,
> in the golden continent,
> in the pleasant land that is west of Mount Meru,
> in North America,
> where there are rivers like the Mississippi, Kansas, Alabama, Illini [Illinois], Ohio, Hudson, St. John, etc., teeming with various forms of life in them,
> surrounded by mountains like the Rockies and the McKinley,
> in the midst of the great oceans like the Prashanta [literally, "peaceful," here referring to the Pacific] and the Atlantic,
> in the city of [Jacksonville],
> in the presence of all the divine beings, Brahmans et al.
> I am performing [this ritual].[8]

Several variations on this theme exist, but in all these formulaic salutations, worshipers place themselves in a land both pleasant and part of Puranic geography. It is a bold move. It is not that America is some offshore colony to Bharata or India: instead, America is identified as a specific part of the Sanskrit textual cosmology, and this recognition is fitted seamlessly into the rituals.

One way American places can be brought under the sacred canopy of Hindu cosmology is by the mixing of sacred waters. In *Walden*, in a passage penned at the end of a winter spent with the Hindu holy book the Bhagavad Gita, Henry David Thoreau reports seeing workers cutting the ice on Walden Pond into large chunks for export to India:

> In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagavat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial. . . . I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahman . . . come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.[9]

Thoreau could scarcely have imagined that within 150 years of his meditations, the waters of the Ganges (referred to henceforth by the Indian name "Ganga") would be brought to Massachusetts to a temple of the Goddess Lakshmi in Ashland (not far from Walden Pond) and to dozens of other U.S. temples, then mingled with the waters of local rivers to make those spaces sacred.

Hindus think of rivers as liquid purifiers, capable of spiritually cleansing all who bathe in them. But why should they be mingled with the waters of the Mississippi and the Suwanee?

On the simplest level, there is a powerful notion of contagion—the idea that the sacrality attached to the Ganga and other rivers will physically attach itself to whatever rivers it touches. In fact, this is what many Hindus attending the rituals will tell you. The waters of the Ganga are, as it were, contagiously purifying. That is why, when a person dies, sacred water is sprinkled on the body and even poured into the mouth. This is why the impure ashes of the cremated are immersed in sacred rivers.

When water is not physically present, it is possible to project the presence

of sacred rivers spiritually into the local waters. In a prayer that is often used to consecrate the waters to be used in a religious ritual or even daily before bathing, the Ganga is invoked by its popular names—Nandini, Bhagirathi, Jahnavi. The river goddess is requested to come and abide in the waters one will be using. Thus, in Hindu weddings in Gainesville, Florida; in temple consecrations in Houston or Chicago; or before bathing in India, the Ganga is ritually invoked even when there is no water present. And India's other rivers are petitioned to come in spirit and reside in that water. All of India's rivers—the Ganga, the Yamuna, the Godavari, the mythical Sarasvati, the Narmada, the Sindhu (Indus), and the Kaveri—are said to pool in the ritual jar wherever the rite takes place.

But there is more going on here than just spiritually or physically inviting holy Indian rivers into local liquid. It is simply not the case that the water of the Suwanee is a passive holder for the sacred energy of Indian water. As noted earlier, during the intention to perform any ritual, the names of American rivers—the Mississippi, the Hudson, the Suwanee, and so on—are mentioned. And they would not appear in this litany if they were not already sacred in some intrinsic way. Rivers nourish crops and feed human beings—they are "mothers." And while the biological mother from India is special, one learns to revere one's adoptive mother too. In this way, American rivers become part of the sacred geography of Hinduism's mother.

Finally, one may meditate on the patterns of a pilgrimage described in Sanskrit texts and done regularly in India, a ritual with some bearing on the mingling of sacred waters. In a practice described in a medieval text, the Adhyatma Ramayana (a version of the Ramayana epic), pilgrims go to the seaside town of Rameswaram, located near the subcontinent's southern tip and sacred to the gods Rama and Shiva. The pilgrims bathe in the Bay of Bengal, take sand from the beach, and carry it to either the city of Kasi (Banaras) or Prayag (Allahabad). The Ganga flows through Kasi; in Prayag, there is an auspicious confluence of the Ganga, the Yamuna, and the (mythical) Sarasvati, which is said to flow underground. The pilgrims dissolve the sands from Rameswaram in a holy river in northern India. Then they carry some water from these northern rivers back to the southern town of Rameswaram and use it to bathe the image of Shiva there. Physical elements from two distant parts of India are thus united in the ritual of pilgrimage. Therefore, in U.S. rituals used to consecrate the land by mingling waters from two continents, devotees are adapting rituals that go back to the Puranas.

Hindus from many philosophical communities believe that the supreme

being makes itself accessible through incarnations on earth. But landscapes can be incarnated, too, and can take on new forms. Some American temples now try either to recognize resemblances between an American landscape and distinctive sacred spots in India or to re-create such similarities. The earliest attempt to recognize a geographical similarity came with the building of the Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh, which, as this 1986 statement indicates, many devotees likened to India's Prayag, another site where three rivers join together:

> Pittsburgh, endowed with hills and a multitude of trees as well as the confluence of the three rivers, namely, the Allegheny, the Monongahela, and the sub-terranean river (brought up via the 60 foot high fountain at downtown) to form the Ohio river is indeed a perfect choice for building the first and most authentic temple to house Lord Venkateswara. The ever-growing crowds that have been coming to the city with the thriveni Sangama of the three rivers to worship at the Temple with the three vimanas reassure our belief that the venerable Gods chose this place and the emerald green hillock to reside in.[10]

To understand temple building in the United States, it may be helpful to recall a Hindu tendency that Kees Bolle calls "topographical religiosity." Bolle's comments in "Speaking of a Place" are particularly relevant: "Naturally, some of the temples are more famous than others; one might say that they are more tangibly the real residence of God. But unless one understands the primacy of the place, the nature of the sacred in most of Hinduism remains incomprehensible, and the plurality and variety of gods continues to form an unsolvable puzzle. God is universal because he is there."[11] In being "there" at Penn Hills, Pennsylvania, and Poughkeepsie, New York, this universal God becomes particular, this land, holy.

There are now at least two Kasis (Banarases) in the United States: the Western Kasi Shiva Temple (Paschima Kasi Viswanatha Temple) in Flint, Michigan, and the Kashi Ashram (hermitage) in Sebastian, Florida. But some of the most intriguing attempts to re-create the landscape—to make it mirror an Indian site—have come in Barsana Dham, near Austin, Texas, and in the Iraivan Temple in Kauai, Hawaii.

In Hawaii, not only are the names reminiscent of India (the Path of the Nayanmars, San Marga Path, Rishi Valley, Rudraksha Forest, and so forth), but in each environment "pilgrims enjoy groves of plumeria, konrai forest hibiscus, fragrant vines, lilikoi, native Hawaiian species, ferns, bubbling water-

falls, ponds and more."[12] Thus, the physical environment of India meshes with the local Hawaiian land to create a unique milieu.

Barsana Dham has been made to resemble Barsana in northern India, said to be the hometown of Radha, the beloved of Lord Krishna. At Barsana Dham, all the important landmarks of Braj, the area in northern India where Krishna and Radha lived, have been re-created: "This beautiful 230-acre property is a representation of the holy land of Braj in India where Shree Radha Rani and Shree Krishn appeared 5,000 years ago. Areas of Barsana Dham have been developed to be places for devotional inspiration and meditation. All the important places of Braj like Govardhan, Radha Kund, Prem Sarovar, Shyam Kuti, Man Mandir and Mor Kuti, etc. are represented in Barsana Dham where the natural stream named Kalindi represents the Yamuna river of Vrindaban."[13]

Thanks to these similarities, Barsana in Texas is, according to its champions, fated to become a key pilgrimage site for those who cannot go to India: "Barsana Dham will be a place of pilgrimage for millions of Indians living in the Western world. There are thousands of people who desire to go to Braj, the birth place of their beloved Lord Shree Krishn, but they cannot go for the lack of time or for any other reason. They all can easily come to Barsana Dham and have the same spiritual feelings as though they were in Braj in India."[14] In a parallel situation in Hawaii, Dr. Sambamurthi Sivachariya, who came from a large temple in Madras, India, to preside as chief priest for two days of ceremonies, said, "I am too old to go on pilgrimage to the holy sites in the Indian Himalayan mountains, where, according to Hinduism, God Himself resides and gives His grace to pilgrims. That was a life-long dream of mine. But now that I have come to the most beautiful place in the world, Kauai, to this sacred land, I feel my dream has been fulfilled. I have come to the home of God."[15]

One of the smallest public Hindu shrines in this country is in the register of tourist attractions in the Hawaiian island of Oahu. This little place of worship, now run by Hindus from India, is a small street-side shrine in Wiahiawa dedicated to Viswanatha (a form of Shiva). Local devotees translate Viswanatha as "Lord of the Universe," and the organization that initially oversaw it was called the Lord of the Universe Society (LOTUS). The shrine contains two conical stones regarded as "healing stones" in traditional Hawaiian religion but revered by Hindus as a manifestation of Shiva. Hindus believe that the main stone here is a linga (a manifestation of Shiva); in indigenous religion, that stone embodies the Hawaiian priest-healer god Lono. According to another local myth, this stone represents two sisters from Kauai

who were turned into rocks. Regular Hindu worship at this shrine, located not far from Pearl Harbor, is conducted on the third Sunday of every month. Hindus plainly have co-opted the Hawaiian deity. As one south Indian there told me, "Lord Shiva has manifested himself here."

On the Hawaiian island of Kauai, an existing Hindu temple is gradually being replaced by a larger one being carved in India and transported overseas in segments. This stone temple, which devotees say will last for 1,001 years, is designed by Sri Ganapati Sthapati, an important sculptor and architect of temples from India. The current temple on the site was built in 1970 by Swami Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, who was born in America and initiated in Sri Lanka. Gurudeva ("the divine or respected teacher"), as he is popularly known, says that in 1975 Shiva appeared to him in three visions, inspiring him to locate the temple there: "I saw Lord Siva walking in the meadow near the Wailua River. . . . His face was looking into mine. Then He was seated upon a great stone. I was seated on His left side. . . . An inner voice proclaimed, 'This is the place where the world will come to pray.' "[16] This vision has only reaffirmed, in Hindu terms, the indigenous holiness of the site, which lies at the foot of Mount Waialeale near the sacred Wailua River. The ancient Hawaiians are said to have called it Pihanakalani, "where heaven touches Earth." In fact, one of the ancient Hawaiian temples allegedly was located here. The ritual to lay the foundation incorporated rites from Hindu and local Hawaiian traditions: "A series of fire ceremonies were performed over a 48-hour period to purify the site and to invoke the blessings of God, gods and the local Hawaiian and Hindu guardian spirits. On the first day, April 4th, specially invited local guests joined the proceedings at the usually cloistered monastery. They included the Honorable Maryanne Kusaka, Mayor of Kauai, Hawaiian priestess Leimomi Mo'okini Lum, . . . former Kauai mayor Joanne Yukimura."[17]

While it seems both natural and practical to honor Hawaiian traditions in the consecration of a Hindu temple in Hawaii, this is not an interfaith or syncretic temple, of which there are many in America. In fact, it is not even a pan-Hindu temple. Most American temples (there are a few exceptions) are home to multiple deities. The Kauai temple, however, is unambiguously sectarian. Dedicated to the god Shiva, it has a large dancing Shiva in the middle. Toward the front is a nonanthropomorphic form of Shiva, the linga, a conical piece of crystal rock. In 1987, a rare six-sided quartz crystal Shiva linga was said to have been discovered and brought to Kauai from Arkansas. It is significant that this crystal is American born. But while the manifestation of

Shiva as this crystal lingam is American and the land is American territory, the temple itself will be carved in India. The ritual landscape will be reaffirmed in terms of Puranic geography, and consecrating waters will come from both India and America.

Is the American land holy? It is important to note that there was no concerted Hindu effort, no grand strategy by religious leaders, and no commission to discuss this question in the wave of the post-1965 immigration. The Hindus who settled here and the priests who came from India worked with traditional cultural tropes, ritually consecrating and praising the land they were inhabiting, formally glorying it in song.

Hindus have drawn several other homologies to show how this land is sacred and to make it so. The American eagle, for example, has been compared to Vishnu's mount, Garuda. In fact, many Hindus find this an obvious comparison. In an e-mail posted on December 31, 2000, on a listserv run by members of the Hindu Sri Vaishnava community, a writer wished the moderator a happy new year in English and Tamil. "America now seems to be the place of Sri Maha Vishnu," he wrote. "This is a land with devotion to God; this is a land of tranquility [*amarikkai* in Tamil, a pun] Is not their national bird [the] eagle—Garudan? May your spiritual work continue to spread our *sampradaya* [tradition]. May Sri Maalolaa [another name of Vishnu] bless you all with long life, excellent health and prosperity."[18]

While it has largely been post-1965 Hindus who have sacralized the land while building their temples, attempts to mimic the Indian landscape in their new country can be seen as early as 1905 in California. Hindu temples—at least those founded by immigrants from southern India—ordinarily resemble in some respect the medieval temples of south India. But the first Hindu temple in this country imitated not only temple towers from the Indian state of Bengal but also Muslim and European architectural tropes. It also explicitly incorporated American symbols. And a pamphlet issued at the consecration pointed out these features in case the reader missed the symbolism.

One of the teachers in the Vedanta Society (the leading American Hindu group during the first quarter of the twentieth century), Swami Trigunatita, oversaw the construction of what he called "the First Hindu Temple in the Whole Western World."[19] Sister Gargi, his biographer, notes, "To Swami Trigunatita the first Hindu temple in the whole Western world would be a vital piece of India planted on American soil. The Temple represented the influx of India's great spiritual wisdom into the culture of the West—there to grow and flourish."[20] But although he pronounced this structure a Hindu temple, he

said that it was for Americans. "In actual fact, the Temple was not in any sense Hindu," Sister Gargi notes—"not in organization, activities, membership, architecture, or decor."[21]

The temple's five towers resemble onion domes and call to mind the Kremlin's bulbous towers. Swami Trigunatita, however, specifically designed the architecture to resemble various cultural forms. As a Vedanta Society pamphlet notes, "The Temple may be considered as a combination of a Hindu temple, a Christian church, a Mahommedan mosque, a Hindu math or monastery and an American shrine."[22] So the tower over the main entrance to the auditorium was supposed to look like the bell tower of a church as well as resemble the Taj Mahal. The first tower from the west was an exact miniature of a temple in Benares, except it had a weathervane on top. The second tower was like the Shiva shrine in the Kali temple in Dakshineswar (Calcutta). This tower has three symbols on top, representing the three Hindu spiritual paths, as well as a crescent—a "Turkish or Mahomedan emblem"—at the bottom.[23] The crescent was also said to be sacred to a group of Vaishnavas (Vishnu followers) who believed that it expressed ideas of softness, love, and affection associated with the moon—in short, the path of devotion. The second symbol looks like the sun, which is needed to grow and work and thus depicts the path of karma. The third symbol on this tower is a trident, representing the scepter of Neptune and Shiva. A symbol for the destruction of ignorance, it represents the path of knowledge. The northeast corner—traditionally the most important in any Hindu building—has a tower that resembles the Hindu god Shiva. The tower on the southeast corner was said to resemble European castles and to stand for "the great strength of character and spiritual culture."[24]

The rampant symbolizing did not stop there, however. The building also integrates elements from Indian yogic practice. The canopy over the mosaic and marble entrance represents the thousand-petaled lotus, which certain schools of Indian thought believe lies in the brain. In yogic anatomy, a subtle passage called the *sushumna* is said to go up the spinal cord to this lotus. On either side are two auxiliary passages, known as the *ida* and *pingala*. The tubular lights on both sides of the canopy represents these two passages.

Moving from the yogic to the patriotic, at the head of the canopy—the one that represented the thousand-petaled lotus on the crest of the *sushumna* tube—was an eagle. As the explanatory pamphlet put it, because the structure was America's first Hindu temple, "honor and appreciation have been shown by carrying in the architectural art of the temple, the Sushumna—the main chan-

nel of spiritual illumination—up to an American eagle."[25] Lest this patriotism be lost on anyone, under the wings of this eagle were painted American flags. Even the colors of the American flag were said to be echo sentiments sacred to the Hindu—red was the color of Brahma (a minor Hindu creator deity), white of Shiva, and blue of Lord Vishnu. Further, red was the color of *rajas* (passion), white of *sattva* (purity), and blue of *tamas* (inertia).[26]

Boldly and with considerable creative synergy, Swami Trigunatita designed this building in the first few years of the twentieth century. We see in this process an important trend: the ability of creative Hindu thinkers to harmonize diverse thoughts and material forms, variant cultures and religions, and disparate philosophical and patriotic traditions. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find a better example of this kind of syncretic creativity than this pioneering temple.

Members at this first temple reached out to their fellow Americans through talks on Vedanta—its nondualistic philosophy, meditations, and yogas. The post-1965 immigrant community has discovered different ways to reach out to its neighbors. One key strategy is engaged Hinduism.

The western model of interreligious dialogue is heavily slanted toward the Protestant preoccupation with beliefs. Hindus, by contrast, have typically focused their piety on ritual action, particularly in the sphere of dharma. Dharma means "duty"—doing what is right. When combined with another key concept, that of detached action, dharma yields one of the major emphases of the Hindu tradition. The Bhagavad Gita speaks of the importance of doing one's duty without expectation of reward or punishment.

In this sphere of righteous and detached action, U.S. Hindu institutions are finding common ground with volunteer organizations around the United States. Many American temples, including the Hindu Temple of Atlanta, conduct regular blood drives. This may not seem unusual, except that in the Hindu ritual context, the shedding of blood is highly polluting. Nonetheless, blood drives—almost entirely unknown in India—take place regularly in U.S. Hindu temples, typically in downstairs halls and often in conjunction with the American Red Cross. The Hindu temple in Tampa encourages not just blood donations but also organ donations. Its temple magazine speaks about donating organs as doing one's dharma.

The context in which this social engagement takes place is, of course, significant. Many of the trustees, founders, and major donors to U.S. temples are physicians with an acute awareness of the importance of blood and organ donations. Through their encouragement, these drives have become quite

prominent in many temples. Physicians also help organize regular temple-based health fairs. Major health care companies set up booths and health screening stalls and sometimes pay the temple a modest fee for that privilege.

Even more striking are the efforts of Hindu temple participants to work alongside people of other faiths to help the less fortunate. In November 1998, volunteers from the Kalamazoo, Michigan, temple worked at the Gospel Mission to provide food for the homeless during Thanksgiving time. Under the headline "Thanksgiving Dinner for the Homeless," the newsletter reports that under the temple's auspices, "on Nov, 15, 1998, a dinner for 110 homeless people was prepared and served at the Gospel Mission's kitchen and dining facilities. It was coordinated by the SHAKTI committee."[27] Shakti, in Sanskrit, is power and energy, frequently conceptualized as a goddess. While Hindus laud the donation of food (Sanskrit, *anna dana*), only a few temples in India do it and then only under specific ritual conditions. For example, this kind of donation also traditionally occurs in memory of one's ancestors.

Temples with more volunteers, such as the Hindu Temple of Atlanta, now have volunteer programs in the soup kitchens of the Atlanta Union Mission and other evangelical churches. The mission has no connection with the Hindu tradition except perhaps one that happened felicitously and by chance —it is known by its acronym, AUM, which is the traditional spelling for the sacred sound of "om" in India. On its Web site, the AUM describes itself as "a non-denominational Christian ministry that brings Christ's healing power to any person in crisis through programs of rescue and recovery."[28]

The mission is explicitly evangelical, yet members of the Hindu temple work there in common cause. Ravi Sarma, the former chair of the temple's Community Services Committee, observes,

> Four years ago, we started a holiday food drive and Toys for Tots program to participate in the needs of the community. Last year, Seshu Sarma started a semiannual blood drive for the local chapter of the American Red Cross. This year, we sponsored two days of meals served at the Atlanta Union Mission, which provides food and shelter to local homeless and indigent population. We chose January 15 and 16 to commemorate Martin Luther King's birthday as well as Sankranthi. Community members provided funds in memory of loved ones who passed away (as *anna dana*). Our volunteers also provide staffing for the soup kitchen one weekend a month as part of our ongoing work with the AUM.
>
> We also support the Atlanta Community Food Bank by collecting non-

perishable canned food and money. In 1998, we provided 890 pounds of food. (The local Swaminarayan Temple provided 1,800 pounds of food.) We were the top two religious institutes in their holiday food drive. I am in the process of putting together a summer internship program with temple youth to provide help with the food bank's assembly line, where they sort out donated items and get them ready for distribution. . . .

We consider this *seva* [community service], and our motto is, "Serving with devotion, the volunteers of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta." Our hope is that our community realizes the value of and need for service.[29]

The dates the Atlanta temple chooses for its cooperative ventures with the AUM are noteworthy. One such period was January 15–17, 1999, which coincided with both the Hindu festival of Pongal and Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. The south Indian festival of Pongal, or Makara Sankaranti, ordinarily observed at the winter solstice, is a time of thanksgiving; it is also an especially meritorious time to make donations.

So why do the Hindu temples cooperate with evangelical groups such as the Gospel Mission in Kalamazoo and the AUM? It might be simpler for them to associate with mainline Protestant churches or even secular institutions. One very pragmatic reason is that Hindu temples lack the financial or human resources to mount these operations on their own and find it easier to plug into existing organizations.

The other reasons are more interesting. First, evangelical churches have a history of running outreach programs in these communities. They have already identified basic needs and are meeting them. Second, these are not the kinds of religious institutions that would in the ordinary course of events engage in conversation with Hindus. Some temples seek such institutions out for precisely this reason. With evangelicals, there is no push for interreligious dialogue, though the ad hoc conversations that happen in the course of volunteer activities may bring these people together and foster better understanding. One Hindu told me that mainline Protestants focus too much on dialogue and that meetings with them often achieve nothing more than making the participants feel good about themselves. In soup kitchens, real work gets done.

Based on the need issue, the Hindu temple of Atlanta also takes the time to volunteer for children who have at least one parent afflicted with AIDS. A December 27, 1998, e-mail bulletin from the temple says, "The Community Services (Humanitarian Activities) Committee of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta is pleased to inform that the 1998 Holiday Food and Toys Drive has been suc-

cessfully completed. Nearly $6oo dollars worth of new toys were gift wrapped and delivered to AID Atlanta, for children with AIDS or children of parents with AIDS. Several hundred pounds of canned food and a check are being presented to the Atlanta area Community Food Bank."[30] According to Sarma, "We hope to continue that activity. . . . Our plans include: working in shelters for women and children in some of the counties of Atlanta. Since Atlanta is very big now, we want to provide volunteer help in several areas in the metro area, near where people live."[31] This *seva* is karma yoga, or action without expectation of reward; this is engaged Hinduism; this is American volunteer activity. In calling it *seva* or connecting it with the act of *anna dana*, we have an American activity explained through a traditional Hindu idiom.

Many narratives describe Hindus transforming, transmitting, and jettisoning traditions from India in the American landscape. Certain deities—village goddesses, for example—are not brought to the United States, and the phenomenon of Hindu goddesses possessing devotees is not common here, as it is in India. Performing arts serve as effective ways of transmitting religion and culture. In a wide assortment of areas, we see the transformation of existing customs as well as the development of new ones. Thus, Hindu temples have now introduced new worship services to mark graduation exercises in school; newsletters announce that, on Mother's Day weekend, the Goddess Lakshmi will be worshipped in the Ganesha Temple in Nashville. By introducing these new customs, Hindus are participating in American civic life, reiterating their Indian American status.

But Hindus are also transforming Hinduism and America with a their new understanding of the American landscape. Hinduism, as a religion, is closely tied to land in the Indian subcontinent and is very territorial. The immigrants ordinarily view Puranic cosmology and Hindu stories in a nonliteral sense, yet it is ceremonially necessary to locate oneself in the correct part of the universe at the right moment of time. To transform and in some way acknowledge the American land—the land that the Native Americans held sacred, the land on which the early Christians built their churches—as sacred is a bold, innovative, and perhaps necessary act of being Hindu on foreign soil. It is a form of internal negotiation within Hinduism to adapt to a new environment. It is an Americanization of the Hindu tradition. Landscape patterns of traditional sites are recognized in the American geography; the familiar holy spots are recreated. From such acts of whimsical recognition, some people move into a state of awe at a divine teleology. Manu, in the first century C.E., said that the holy territory in India was the land where the black antelope freely roamed.

The Hindus in America have traded it for the land where the deer and the antelope play.

But there is also external negotiation—that is, with the Gospel Mission, evangelical churches, and the like. One can think of several kinds of external negotiations: between individuals, between civic institutions and individuals, between religious institutions and individuals, between religious institutions and civic institutions, and between religious institutions and other religious institutions. When members of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta work with the town authorities to have a statue of Mahatma Gandhi erected at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center, when they collect blood for the Red Cross, we have external negotiations between a religious (Hindu) institution and a civic one. However, when the Kalamazoo temple works alongside members of a Gospel Mission soup kitchen or the Hindu Temple of Atlanta collaborates with the Atlanta Union Mission, we have members of one Hindu institution negotiating their space in America with members of an external religious institution. Members of both institutions are negotiating their connection with the other in the simple act of serving food for the homeless; members of both religions are changed through this interaction.

In the late seventh century, Parsis—that is, Zoroastrians from Persia—came to India for refuge and wanted to remain in the new country. They petitioned a local ruler for permission to stay. Worried about a drain on his resources, the ruler replied with a symbolic action. He sent his chief minister to the head of the Parsis with no verbal message. The chief minister was to show the potential immigrants a glass of milk, filled to the brim. This would indicate that there was no more room in the country. It was all filled up.

The head of the Parsi delegation got the message. Silently, he took the glass of milk, stirred in a spoonful of sugar and sent it back to the king, asking him to taste it. The Parsis, he alleged by this action, would not take up much room but instead would add flavor to the land and its people. The king smiled and allotted the land to the fledgling immigrant community. And indeed, over the centuries the Parsis have added to India's intellectual, cultural, and political strengths. So too, say the Hindus who tell and retell this story, will every new immigrant, every new religious and ethnic group that gets the privilege of calling America home.

NOTES

1. Law of Manu, 2:17–23; adapted from *The Laws of Manu*, translated by Georg Buhler (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975).

2. Transcript of devotional song from *Bhajans at Sri Venkateswara Temple*, Sri Venkateswara Temple, 1986.

3. J. Sethuraman, "Sri Venkatesha America Vaibhava Stotram," 8; all translations by Sethuraman.

4. Ibid., 20, 22.

5. *Vishnu Purana*, translated by H. H. Wilson (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1961), 2:2; *Bhagavata Purana*, translated by Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), 20, 18–19.

6. Diana L. Eck, *Banaras: City of Light* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 34–36.

7. Recited by Sethuraman during a ritual in Tallahassee, Florida, July 1999.

8. Sri Nathamuni, Jacksonville Temple, personal communication, September 1999.

9. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings*, edited by Joseph Wood Krutch (New York: Bantam, 1981), 324–25.

10. "Kavachas for the Deities," Sri Venkateswara Temple, Penn Hills, 1986.

11. Kees Bolle, "Speaking of a Place," in *Myths and Symbols: Essays in Honor of Mircea Eliade*, edited by J. M. Kitagawa and C. M. Long (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 128–29.

12. See <http://www.himalayanacademy.com/hawaii/iraivan/iraivan_temple.htm l>.

13. <http://www.barsanadham.org>.

14. Ibid.

15. "San Marga Foundation Stones" (press release), April 9, 1995, quoted at <http:// www.hindunet.org/alt_hindu/1995_Apr_1/msg00001.html>.

16. "Mystical Master," *Hinduism Today*, April–June 2002, <http://www.hinduism today.com/archives/2002/4-6/26-33_mystical_master.shtml>.

17. "San Marga Foundation Stones." According to this press release, "It was Leimomi's ancestor, Kuamo'o Mo'okini, who founded this very temple in 480 C.E."

18. Letter from Sri Anbil Ramaswami, forwarding a letter from Sri K. Devanathan Swami, posted on the Yahoo listserve SriRangaSri, December 30, 2000, <http:// groups.yahoo.com/group/SriRangaSri/message/26>.

19. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Trigunatita: His Life and Work* (San Francisco: Vedanta Society of Northern California, 1997), 175.

20. Ibid., 170.

21. Ibid., 169.

22. Ibid., 198, 368.

23. Ibid., 198.

24. Ibid., 203.

25. Ibid., 369.

26. Ibid.

27. *Kalamazoo (Michigan) Indo-American Cultural Center and Temple Newsletter*, December 1998, 2.

28. <http:www.aumcares.org/AboutUs.htm>.

29. Ravi Sarma, conversation with author, November 1999.

30. Hindu Temple of Atlanta, e-mail to members, December 27, 1998.

31. Ravi Sarma, personal communication, November 1999.