



# Largest human gathering in history, Hindu festival highlights the religion's growth and influence

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by David Ward

Imagine everyone in Manhattan walking to the tip of Wall Street at midnight to take a dip in the Hudson River.

That's how Robert Moses, a 63-year-old photographer living in Dublin, New Hampshire, described his experience at the 1989 Maha Kumbh Mela, the Hindu festival that attracts tens of millions of pilgrims to northern India every 12 years.

“We were walking in a river of people that was probably a double-lane highway wide,” he said. “All moving in one direction, barefoot, quietly, in the middle of the night, so tightly it would’ve been impossible to walk in the opposite direction.”

For Moses, a Jew who has embraced the Hindu way of life, the ritual bathing at Sangam — the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers — was nothing short of sublime.

“I have to say that it was surprising to me that it was a very powerful spiritual experience. I had this feeling that there was this flow of light, kind of a vertical flow of light, coming down.”

The 2013 Kumbh Mela, which lasts 55 days, is now at full tilt. A sprawling tent city blankets the flood plain near Allahabad as devotees gather to wash away the sins of past lives and free themselves from the karmic cycle of death and rebirth.

The size is beyond staggering, closer to unfathomable. Imagine 7.5 square miles, 99 parking lots, 3,600 buses, 14,000 policemen, 342 miles of water pipelines, 21 million gallons of drinking water, 42,500 toilets, 14 hospitals and an average of 10,000 people lost and found per week.

As for the ultimate figure: on Feb. 10, the festival’s most auspicious bathing day, an estimated 30 million people congregated, making it the largest human gathering in the history of the world.

As Kumbh Mela grows larger each cycle — roughly 100 million will participate in 2013 — so does the number of Hindus throughout the world, including in America.

When Moses attended 24 years ago, there were only a few hundred thousand Hindus in the U.S. That number now exceeds 1.5 million and may be closer to 3 million, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.



With that growth comes increased influence in the business community, religious circles and national politics, as well as an evolving definition of what it means to be Hindu in America.

### Gideons of the Gita

“In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagavad-Gita.” So said Henry David Thoreau more than 150 years ago.

Travelers in motels across the country can now follow Thoreau’s practice thanks to an organization called Motel Gita, which places the Hindu scripture in motel nightstands a la Gideons International.

The Gita's growing prevalence is a testament not only to Hindus' faith, but also to their business prowess.

Indian Americans own about two million hotel rooms in the U.S. — nearly half of the total — according to the book “Life Behind the Lobby.” Half of these owners are surnamed Patel, and 70 percent come from the western Indian state of Gujarat.

“Our mission is to place a million Bhagavad Gitas in the motels across the USA,” said Nisha Chopada, a director for Motel Gita in Florida. “Right now we are at 150,000.”

The Gita — and Hinduism — now have a prominent place on Capitol Hill as well. On Jan. 3, Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-Hawaii) became the first Hindu member of Congress. She used the Bhagavad Gita for her swearing-in ceremony.

Gabbard, who was born in American Samoa, adopted Hinduism in her teens. There is no formal "conversion" process for Hinduism, a faith largely void of dogma.

Despite the signs of progress, ignorance of and discrimination against Hinduism persist, said Khyati Joshi, an associate professor at Farleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. As evidence, she cited continued community opposition to Hindu temple-building projects, the bullying of kids for being vegetarian and the exoticification of Hinduism.

“(Hinduism) is seen as something far-fetched,” she said with regard to the latter. “The story of Hanuman jumping from present-day India to present-day Sri Lanka to save Sita is categorized as a myth. That’s no more, or less, of a myth for a believer than is the virgin birth.”

Politicians need to do their part, Joshi said. “There has to be greater awareness among lawmakers so that 'Asian' religions don’t all get grouped together.”

She said the first Hindu appointed to President Obama’s Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships was asked to represent not only Hindus, but Sikhs and Buddhists, also.



“It ends up creating friction. It doesn’t go over well when there’s just one Christian representative for just Christians. So when you have one representative for three religions, that’s problematic to say the least. This notion of putting them all together — that has got to stop.”

Sanskrit for service

The spreading influence of Hindu Americans stems, in part, from their loyalty to their faith. Among Asian immigrants, Hindus enjoy the highest retention rate, with 81 percent still professing the faith of their youth, according to a 2012 Pew Forum poll.

By comparison, only 54 percent of those raised Buddhist identify as such today.

That doesn’t mean that second- and third-generation Hindus are as traditional as their parents, however. In fact, the evolution of American Hinduism is the subject of much discussion among first-generation Hindu Americans.

“The children growing up are more Americanized,” said 61-year-old Shyamala Chivukula, who emigrated from India in the early 1990s.

“Second- and third-generation want to be involved in everything. They want to say exactly what they think.”

Professor Joshi agreed. “The second generation isn’t really going to the temple,” she said. “That’s not to say they aren’t engaged spiritually with Hinduism and doing things at home.

“(Many) don’t know Sanskrit, don’t know the prayers, but still want to identify as Hindu, still believe they’re Hindu.”

She sees rising generations of Hindus becoming more civically engaged, living out their faith through the concept of “seva,” which is Sanskrit for “service.”

In 2009, Hindus established an organization called Hindu American Seva Communities (HSAC) with guidance from the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. The group works with colleges, Hindu temples and municipal governments to organize Festivals of Service in communities around the country.

“(Young Hindus) want to be involved in the community, and seva is going to be a way they’re going to do it,” Joshi said. “It’s something that’s, of course, very much valued in our society in the United States.”

HSAC also works with yoga studios, which continue to multiply in number and serve as an introduction to Hindu principles and practices for millions of Americans.

Yoga and pilates (the latter is not related to Hinduism) are now a combined \$7 billion industry in the U.S., growing at nearly eight percent with approximately 25,000 studios, according to market research firm IBISWorld.



## Keeping traditions alive

Shyamala Chivukula bathed in the Ganges in her younger years. Half a century later she's teaching science at Bonneville Junior High School in Salt Lake City.

In a way, her experience tells the story of Hinduism in America. Born in Bombay to a civil servant and housewife, Chivukula grew up in a world of contrasts.

“You see one side poverty and one side rich,” she recalled. “You see the difference between that, and naturally you want to bridge the gap.”

She came to Utah from India 22 years ago with help from her brother who lived in Chicago. Half of her family still resides in India.

“Mostly, I wanted my children to come to a better educational system,” she said.

Attaining a high level of education is characteristic of Asian-American Hindus. According to a 2012 Pew Forum study, they are more educated than any other religious group in the U.S. Compared to the national average, Hindus are nearly three times more likely to hold a bachelor's degree and nearly five times as likely to have at least some post-bachelor's education.

Of Chivukula's two sons, one earned a doctorate in pharmaceuticals and one an MBA.

“We come with a drive to achieve,” Chivukula said. “To make life better than what we had is what drives us. Bombayites are like New Yorkers, always wanting to do something better, always rushing around.”

Chivukula has done well herself. In 2009, she won one of 10 Huntsman Awards for Excellence in Education in Utah public schools.

As a whole, Asian-American Hindus not only attain more education, they also earn more money than any other religious group: 70 percent earn at least \$75,000 per year. Only 28 percent of the general public reaches that threshold.

The affluence, high level of education and growing number of Hindus in America is largely a function of U.S. immigration policy, Professor Joshi said.

“After the Immigration Act of 1965 the immigration preferences were for health care professionals and folks in engineering fields.

“(Hindu immigrants) had capital. They built their own medical practices, engineering firms. Some went into academia. These are people who did well and then built temples and communities.”

Speaking of temples, there wasn't one when Chivukula first arrived in Salt Lake. There wasn't a priest, either, so Chivukula took on those duties.



“I volunteered to be the priestess. I used to do the rituals for everyone here who wanted it in Utah.”

After ten years, the Hindu community built a temple and Chivukula now fills more of an administrative role. In the two decades since she arrived, the community has grown to “between 3,000 and 5,000 people, up from 500 to 600 families,” and it includes not only Indian, but Nepali and Burmese immigrants as well.

While younger generations may have a different conception of what it means to be Hindu, Chivukula is still highly traditional.

“I wake up at four in the morning and say my prayers,” she said. “There are certain rituals I do everyday — chants from the Vedas and Upanishads. I have very strong feelings about our tradition and culture.”