

The Future of Temples?

Summary: First- and second-generation Hindu Americans stress the importance of intergenerational communication of Hindu values as necessary to maintaining temples and Hindu culture. In light of this, many temples offer educational programs such as "children's pujas," where parents and children come to the temple and learn how to make offerings, summer camps, youth conferences, dance and language classes.

Some of America's Hindu temples are among the most beautiful in the world. Their ritual life is conducted by priests from India, with elaborate and aesthetically beautiful *pujas* and *abhishekas*. Their special celebrations often extend over many days. "The main reason we did it is for our children," said one of the founders of the large Hindu temple in Livermore, California. His words would likely be echoed by founders in every temple in America.

As soon as their children began to be socialized outside the home, many Hindu American parents began to ask, "What will become of our children's sense of Hindu identity as they grow up?" They began to develop educational materials and opportunities for the next generation. Even when they built elaborate temples, they began to ask, "What will happen to these great temples when the children grow up?" Some worried about having enough educational infrastructure in place to be able to recreate the religious knowledge that the second generation might have been more exposed to in India. Some complained that their children just did not understand what was happening during rituals at their temple. They knew the motions, but didn't understand the concepts. Similarly, there was a fear that the second generation were only retaining cultural but not religious values. They were learning about India, but not Hinduism.

Now, decades later, second generation Hindu Americans are grown up, many with families of their own, and concern about the future of Hindu temples in America focuses even more on the third generation. In a June 2010 article featured at Patheos.com Professor Khyati Y. Joshi reasserts the concerns that were expressed in the 1990s, but also draws distinctions between the religious and cultural practices of first, second, and third generation Hindu Americans. She posits that, while temples remain an active source of religious life for the first generation, and it is the first generation that continues to hold leadership positions, the second generation retains only cultural and social ties to the temple. Joshi further asserts that the second generation has not necessarily lost its religiosity, but rather keeps its religious practices in

the home and not necessarily in the temples. She adds, “The second generation also now finds itself as the parent of a third generation to which they want to impart their home culture but feel ill-equipped to do so because of their perceived lack of knowledge, their own lack of capacity with the first generation’s native language, and other reasons.” While many agree with Joshi’s observations, there are also others who would argue that, thanks to youth-targeted initiatives over the past couple decades, the second generation remains very active in temple communities. Yet Joshi voices one question, which is surely a concern for many Hindu Americans: “What services could temples offer related to parenting and the third generation?”

Most temples are now taking seriously the need for education and explanation, not just for the children, but for everyone. Festivals have become occasions for teaching as well as performing rituals. For example, the Lakshmi Puja at Divali will be interrupted as someone takes the microphone and explains the many traditions associated with the festival of lights. There are “children’s *pujas*” in which children come, with their parents, to sit together in the temple, an offering plate in front of them, and learn how to make the offerings. At the Ganesha Puja in New York, they learn the *maha ganapati mantra* and they offer the *kumkum*, the apples, the flowers on their offering plate to Ganesha.

The Sri Venkateswara Temple in Pittsburgh is one Hindu community that makes an exemplary effort to engage its younger generations. In November 2011, a gathering was held specifically to reach out to the youth who had grown up in the temple and had, in the meantime, themselves become adults with young families of their own. The Temple has hosted an annual summer camp for decades, which includes youth from throughout the United States and attempts to instill religious and cultural values. Throughout the year, the S.V. Temple sponsors Indian cultural events, hosting Indian and Indian American guest speakers, musicians, artists, and performers. The temple also offers academic scholarships, holds *yoga*, meditation and dance classes, sponsors youth conferences, and even holds language classes and SAT tutoring.

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF), a Hindu advocacy group, offers various opportunities to encourage young Hindu Americans to remain involved in their Hindu communities in the United States. In HAF’s NextGen annual summer essay contests, young participants articulated the significance of their identities as Hindu Americans, demonstrating the blossoming potential of the next generation of Hindu leadership in the U.S. In 2010, HAF launched Hindu American Congressional Internship to encourage young Hindu Americans to be advocates for the Hindu community in the American political sphere.

“The pendulum is swinging back,” said Dr. Uma Mysorekar two decades ago at the temple in Queens. “I too asked three to five years ago if the temples would survive in the next generation. Now young people are coming to the temple. It is very heartening. They want to learn. They want to be able to sit and ask questions.” Her statement remains true today. In 2009, as president of the temple, she oversaw the completion of a multi-million dollar renovation. At the *maha kumbhabhishekam*, a ceremony held to commemorate the end of the renovation and to re-consecrate the space, the temple was packed with youth and young adults.

Ground is broken for a new multi-million dollar American Hindu temple or a temple extension virtually every month. The future of these temples will soon be in the hands of the next generation. The Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago has a youth group that calls itself “In the Wings.” Whether the next generation now “in the wings” truly takes over the energy and commitment to the life of the Hindu temples is a question American Hindus, like many immigrant groups, continue to ask.