

# Appendix H: Hindu Groups

In 2009, The Institute for the Study of American Religion (ISAR) was asked to do a census of the American Hindu Community, the first such attempt to count to enumerate this community. Dr. Constance Jones, a sociologist and professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, and J. Gordon Melton, the head of ISAR oversaw this work. Funding was provided the John Templeton Foundation through a request by the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) based at Pennsylvania State University.

Ten years later, ISAR was also asked to update this enumeration, again with support of the John Templeton Foundation, and under the direction of J. Gordon Melton, still head of the Institute for the Study of American Religion and also a professor at Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion. ISAR had continued to monitor the American Hindu community since the 2010 enumeration.

As in 2009, we sought to call all the approximately 400 known Hindu temples. We faced several obstacles. The most notable of these was the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the suspension of activity and closing of offices at nearly all Hindu temples across the United States into 2021. The second was heightened anxiety over U.S. citizenship, including debates over whether to enumerate citizens separately from other residents in the U.S. Census of 2020. This prompted us to reword our requests to avoid any mention of the decennial government census and ultimately allowed us to reach more than 90 percent of temples.

Most temples do not make or keep counts of their membership (with many having no formal membership) nor of their larger community of support (constituency). Temples regularly reported membership as a range (200 to 500) and often as family units (100 to 150 families), with an understanding that the average size of a family unit was four. For most temples, membership consisted of those individuals or families who regularly supported the temples by their time, attendance, and gifts. Nevertheless, the temples serve a far larger group of worshippers and attendees who might only be seen a couple of times a year at the most important holy days.

## Preliminary Considerations

The term “Hinduism” is among the most contested in the field of religious studies. It arose as a designation of the various religious strains that were found by Westerners on the Indian Subcontinent in the eighteenth century. The term has been met with a range of acceptance by the modern Hindu community but has come to be used by most Indians in the modern West to apply to that range of religions currents that originated on the Indian subcontinent, apart from the three large strains whose adherents have come to be seen as constituting separate religious communities—Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. The Hindu community is tied together by its use of several ancient holy texts (most notably the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, and the Puranas), acknowledgement of the deities discussed in these texts, and the creation of temples at which rituals are performed and holy days observed.

As Hinduism is a name for the religious traditions of India, it is not surprising that the growth of the American Hindu community is tied directly to the growth of the Asian Indian American community, which had increased to approximately 4,606,000 by 2020, more than doubling in the past two decades.

## The Structure of the American Hindu Community

The American Hindu community can be divided into four basic groupings. First, the largest number of believers are associated with the approximately 300 traditional Hindu temples which have been established by first- and second-generation Hindus who have migrated to the United States from the Indian Subcontinent. The initial temple was established in Flushing, New York in the 1970s. Since then, a growing number of temples have been organized. Such temples are locally owned and maintained and organizationally autonomous. Each temple follows one of the major traditions (or sampradaya) of Hindu religion based on the worship of specific deities—Vaisnava, based on the worship of Vishnu (whose most popular incarnations were as Venkateswara and Krishna); Saivite, based on the worship of Shiva and his family—Ganesh, Muragan, Lakshmi; and the Goddess who is worshipped primarily as Durga, Kali, and/or Devi.

Because the initial American temples in a particular location attempted to serve all Indian Americans in their local community, a new phenomenon emerged in the West—the mixed tradition temple. The mixed tradition temple will generally have a form of Vishnu or Shiva at its central altar, but also include murtis (statues) of Durga and other deities in side altars, more or less prominently displayed. In some communities, the side altars may also include (1) a murti of the popular guru (teacher) Sai Baba of Shirdi, (2) Mahavira, the main teacher of the Jain religion, and on rare occasion (3) a murti of Nanak (the founder of the Sikh faith) or Buddha. In larger temples, the initial temple became the central structure of a temple complex which as it develops has come to house separate temples for the different sampradayas.

We were able to reach 280 traditional temples (22 more than the 258 reported in 2010) and attain from them an estimate of their adherents (members + constituency).

Second, over the years the Hindu community has given birth to a variety of movements within the main sampradayas. These now exist as sub-traditions organized around a particular teacher (or lineage of teachers) and one or more distinctive ideas. These movements have produced temples representing various sub-traditions which differ from the more traditional community-based temples primarily by being associated with other temples of the tradition. Typical of these sub-traditions are the temples of the Swaminarayan movement. Swaminarayan Hindus are distinctive in their belief that the prominent nineteenth-century Gujarati teacher Swaminarayan (1781-1830) was an incarnation of the deity Krishna. Based in Gujarat, the movement has followed a lineage of teachers that is traced to Swaminarayan. That lineage has diverged over the years, and several distinctive lineages have emerged, each of which is now the center of separate Swaminarayan groups. Currently, no fewer than ten such groups exist in the United States. The largest of these groups, the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha or BAPS, has emerged as the largest single Hindu group in America, with more than 100,000 adherents. It has attained some added prominence by its construction of large temple complexes in Atlanta, Houston, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

Another set of sectarian temples have grown out of the Bhakti (devotional) movement founded in Bengal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534). The most famous and largest of these Chaitayna groups in the United States is the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (the Hare Krishna movement).

Approximately one third of the Hindu temples now found in the United States are related to the approximately 40 sectarian Hindu groups currently operating in the United States.<sup>1</sup> We made multiple attempts to call the group headquarters of each group. Where we were able to reach someone and attain figures, we reported on them and where we were unable to locate an authorized spokesperson, estimated membership was estimated based in part from the rate of increase (36%) in the total Indian American population.

Third, the nineteenth century in Indian history was marked by a great revival of Hinduism, in part spurred by the challenge of the growth of Christianity during the years of British Colonial rule. This revival gave birth to a several new forms of Hinduism that collectively began known as the Hindu Renaissance. Renaissance groups emphasized on Hindu philosophy even as they downplayed temple worship before the images of the traditional Hindu deities and the special devotion given to particular deities. During the Renaissance era, several new and distinctive Hindu religious communities arose. And in the twentieth century these communities gave birth to multiple competing organizations (comparable to Christian denominations). Hinduism was initially introduced to the West by several representatives of the Hindu Renaissance who were born in India in the late 19th century, most notably Swami Vivekananda (founder of the Vedanta Society) and Swami Yogananda (founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship). Through the twentieth century, addition Hindu teachers raised in the Renaissance groups in India, most notably Ramana Maharshi, Swami Sivananda and Swami Muktananda, founded additional new groups in North America.

As of the 2020s, there are approximately 40 groups that continue the emphases of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu Renaissance. We called the headquarters of each group and were able to attain a national membership estimate from most. Where we were unable to reach a spokesperson from the group, we projected a 2020 membership from a consideration of the growth rate of the American population and the growth rate of those Renaissance groups we were able to reach. Membership in the Renaissance groups is a mixture of Indian Americans and Americans of European heritage, with a very small number of people from other ethnic heritages.

Fourth, in the middle- and late-20th century, several gurus (spiritual teachers), whose perspectives drew heavily on Renaissance themes mixed in various ways with more traditional forms of Hinduism, have appeared in the West. These new forms of the Hindu tradition are most often built around a single Hindu teacher and his/her individual spiritual lineage. Local centers recognizing the authority of a single teacher are organizationally tied together. These groups generally keep the Hindu Renaissance emphasis on Hindu philosophy; focus practice on a particular form(s) of devotion (yoga, meditation); and stress the centra role of the guru or teacher as a conduit of spiritual wisdom. In the 1980s, a set of American-born gurus, continuing the lineage of an Indian teacher began to appear as founders of new movements.

The number of American-born gurus (of non-Indian ethnicity) has continued to grow. More than 40 new post-Renaissance movements have emerged in America since the 1960s.

We have identified 69 yoga/meditation groups operating in the United States, many with only a few centers, others with centers across the United States. As with the Renaissance groups, we attempted to

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<sup>1</sup> For a complete list of the sectarian Hindu groups operating in the United States, see J. Gordon Melton, *The Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religion*. (9<sup>th</sup> ed.: Detroit: Gale/Cengage Learning, 2016). The same volume contains entries on all the Renaissance and 20<sup>th</sup>-century guru-led yoga and meditation groups.

contact the headquarters of each group by phone. For those we reached, we sought a national count on the number of adherents and a verification of the number and location of centers (a substantial minority of which lack a permanent meeting location). Based on the figures given we estimated the number of adherents in the local centers.

The first two of the four groups above comprise the Hindu traditional temple count in the 2020 Religion Census. The second two groups comprise the Hindu yoga and meditation count.

## Summary

We estimate that approximately 831,000 Americans (overwhelmingly of either Asian Indian or European heritage) are members or part of the constituency of 400 traditional Hindu temples or the more than 100 Renaissance and 20<sup>th</sup>-century guru led groups. These adherents are less than half of the estimated number of American who identify as Hindus in recent polling. In addition to these, we also estimate approximately 445,000 U.S. adherents in Hindu yoga and meditation groups. Additional missing (unaffiliated) Hindus appear to be Indian Americans who retain some of their Hindu heritage from prior to their immigration but have yet to find their way to a temple in their new American home.

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