

Toward a Census of the American Hindu Community

by

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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 do an assessment of the number of individuals who are affiliated with the burgeoning and now highly visible Hindu religious facilities that have since 1965 appeared in every state of the Union. Responsibility for overseeing this project was accepted by Dr. Constance Jones, a sociologist and professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, with the work on the census carried out by the ISAR staff. The effort was funded by a grant from the American Religion Data Archive (ARDA) based at Pennsylvania State University.

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, Hinduism, and Sikhism. The Hindu community is tied together by its use of a number of ancient holy texts (most notably the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Mahabharata, the Puranas, etc.), acknowledgement of a number of deities discussed in these texts, and the creation of temples at which rituals are performed and holy days observed.

There being no body which regularly collects data on Hindu religious groups, ISAR originally planned to gather the basic data by mail. As the original mailings met with an almost universal lack of response, that plan was scrapped and replaced with an effort to phone each groups and interview a local representative. Thus, in 2009 a list of all the known Hindu temples (some 450) in the United States was compiled and beginning in January 2010, an attempt was made to call each local temple and interview the president, a priest serving the temple, or local knowledgeable board member. That process continued through the fall. In the process of contacting the temples, several hundred additional temples were discovered and a picture of the overall organization of the community as of the fall of 2010 emerged. That overall organization is presented below.

It is to be noted that most temples do not make or keep counts on their membership (with many having no formal membership) nor on the 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, but overwhelmingly, the temple served 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. Phone calls to the local temples were supplements to on site visits made by Drs. Jones and Melton and members of the ISAR staff to verify information received over the phone and gain some firsthand understanding of the situations in which such observations were made. On site visits were made to multiple locations in southern California, the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, Washington, DC, Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, and Austin.

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 260 traditional Hindu temples which have been established by first and second generation Hindus who have migrated to the United States since the change of the immigration laws in 1965. The initial temple was established in Flushing, Long Island, New York in the 1970s. Since that time as populations of Indian American have emerged in the major urban centers, 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 temples in a particular location will attempt to serve the entire Indian American community, a new phenomena has emerged in the West, the mixed tradition temple. The Mixed tradition temple will generally have either 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 smaller communities, the side altars may include a murti of the popular guru (teacher) Sai Baba of Shirdi, the main teacher of the Jain religion Mahavira, and on rare occasion a murti of Nanak (the founder of the Sikh faith) or Buddha. In larger temples, the initial temple become the central structure of a temple complex which as it develops will house separate temples for the different sampradayas.

Over the years the Hindu community has given birth to a variety of movements within the main sampradayas which now exist and sub-traditions organized around a particular teacher (and/or lineage of teachers) and one or more distinctive ideas. These movements have produced temples representing these various sub-traditions which differ from the more traditional community-based temples primarily by their 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 that they feel 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 less than eight 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 Hindu group in America. It has attained some added prominence by its construction of large temple complexes in Atlanta, Houston and Chicago (with

additional such temples to be completed in the near future). Approximately two thirds of the Hindu temples now found in the United States are related to the approximately 40 particular sub-traditions that have been identified.

Third, the nineteenth century in Indian history was marked a great revival of Hinduism, in part spurred by the challenge of the growth of Christianity during the Colonial era. This revival gave birth to a number of new forms of Hinduism that collectively began known as the Hindu Renaissance. Renaissance groups were known for their emphasis on Hindu philosophy and their downplaying of temple worship and devotion to particular deities. The Renaissance gave birth to a number of new religious traditions, which through the twentieth century led 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 nineteenth century (most notably Swami Vivekananda and Swami Yogananda) and perpetuated by several representative twentieth century figures—Ramana Maharshi, Swami Sivananda and Swami Muktananda). The effort begun by these five figures have led directly to no less than 40 Hindu groups now existing in the United States.

Fourth, In the middle- and late-twentieth century, a number of gurus/teachers, whose perspectives draw heavily on Renaissance themes mixed in various ways with more traditional forms of Hinduism, have appeared in the West, especially since the 1960s. These new forms of the Hindu tradition are most often built around a single Hindu teacher and his/her lineage and local centers are organizationally tied together. These groups generally keep the renaissance emphasis on Hindu philosophy, an emphasis on practice of a particular form(s) of devotion, and the central 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 in the last generation.

Toward a Demographic Assessment of the American Hindu Community

Moving to a count of the number of Hindus in America is a multi-layered problem. Quite visible are those individuals who participate with some regularity (weekly, monthly) in one of the several hundred Hindu temples or organizations. Secondly, there is a much larger group that more occasionally visit a Hindu temple/group for special events or holy day celebrations, who identify with the temple/group visited and to some extent support it financially. Finally, there those who think of themselves as Hindus (especially if they have to choose between religious communities with which to identify), but who for various reasons are not active in anyway in supporting the visible Hindu community. It is this latter groups that is usually reached by polling on American religious preferences and in recent polls that number has been assessed at approximately two million. On one border, this latter group of inactive self-identified Hindus fades into the community of secular Indian Americans who at present profess no religious faith though they may hold some personal spiritual ideals. This largest group of “Hindus” become somewhat visible during Divali, a Hindu holy day that has become a widely celebrated and

secularized national Indian holiday that nevertheless retains much of its religious flavor (much as Christmas has become in the larger Christian culture).

This report is, however, primarily concerned with the first two groups who manifest some active relationship to a Hindu temple or group. Of the 258 traditional Hindu temples in America, 241 have reported membership figures totaling 249,097. This represents a core number of active adherents plus the larger community envisioned as being served by the temple. In addition, we asked each temple the number of people who attended the largest event (holy day) in the last year. As a whole, that number was lower than the reported membership. If the 17 non-reporting temples are taken as a group to be somewhat equal in size to the reporting temples, with an average membership of 1033, an estimated 19,276 members can be added. Thus a total number of 268,364 adherents can be seen to attend and support the 258 traditional temples in the United States. That represents approximately 15 percent of the total number of people who self-identify as Hindus in the United States.

The various temples associations formed by those temples from the various sub-traditions of the Hindu faith present a more complicated situation. The largest temples are associated with the single largest association, the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS). It reports some 25,000 affiliated families, or roughly 100,000 members in its 57 temples. Its larger temples have become popular and well-advertised tourist attractions that are visited by thousands of pilgrims and hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. Apart from it, however, the association temples appear to fall into the same range of membership and constituencies manifest by the traditional community-based temples.

There are approximately 400 association-based temples and the associated smaller centers that have yet to evolve into a temple. Of the 41 temple associations, 25 have reported their membership:

All World Gayatri Pariwar	10	8000
Shri Surya Narayan Mandir	2	350
Congress of Arya Samajs in North America	26	1200
American Sevashram Sangha of NA (BSSNA)	7	2000
ISKCON (Int. Society of Krishna Consciousness)	47	75000
Global Organization for Divinity (G.O.D.)	11	200
VRINDA/ Vrindavan Institute for Vaisnava Culture and Studies	2	50
Sai Baba of Shirdi Temple	21	20000
Sant Shri Asarmaji Ashram	20	5000
Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS)	57	100000
Anoopam Mission	1	10000
Laxmi Narayan Dev (Spiritual organization)/ LNSO, Vadatal Temple	5	14,000
Maningar Shree Swaminarayan Gadi Sansthan (MSSGS)	1	2000
Original Shree Swaminarayan Sampraday (Under Shree Nar Narayan Dev Gadi)	19	7000

Shree Swaminarayan Gurukul, USA	1	5000
Swaminarayan Mandir Vasna Sanstha (SMVS)	2	2000
Yogi Divine Society/Illinois HQ/Waukegan Mandir	2	300
Yogi Divine Society/Hari Dham/Hindu Swami Narayan Temple + Cultural Center	2	5000
Datta Yoga Centers USA	3	3000
Five Fold Path Inc./Agnihotra Worldwide	1	500
Nithyananda Vedic Temples/Life Bliss Foundation	7	3000
Sadhu Vaswami Centers	11	6500
The Sambodh Society	1	700
Veerashaiva Samaja of North America	14	2000

Together they account for 169 of the 400 temples and have a reported 183,000 members

Among those associations that have not reported their membership, there are 54 centers reported as temples and 177 centers reported as a more informal group (satsang, chapter, center etc.) If we assume that the association temples average the same as the traditional community based temple, or approximately 1000 members and that the chapters and satsangs are smaller, around 250, we account for an additional 98,000 adherents.¹ The temple associations thus account for an additional 282,000 Hindu adherents.

The 40 groups of the Hindu Renaissance associations present a more complicated problem of assessment. While a few of the older groups (the Vedanta Societies and the Self-Realization Fellowship) have an old and established membership and constituency, as a whole they have been reluctant to publish any membership figures. Most of the newer groups will publish lists of local affiliated centers but either refuse to count members or offer any assessment on the number of members. Many operate without any formal membership at all, though they have a core of dedicated supporters who attend regularly scheduled events. While almost all the groups have a permanent worship center attached to their headquarters, and many affiliated groups have similar facilities, the majority of groups affiliated with the Renaissance organizations meet informally in borrowed or rented facilities and have a minimal visibility in the communities in which they meet.

It has been observed that such informal groups while on occasion growing larger, will overwhelmingly be in the 5 to 25 range in size, averaging about a dozen. At the same time, none of the groups have the large constituencies manifest in the traditional Hindu temples whose relatively small facilities can often accommodate a worshipping community in the thousands. Based upon that observation, some estimate of the total membership/constituency of the Renaissance groups can be made.

As of 2010 it is estimated that the total number of adherents of the 40 groups can be set at approximately 20,000.

The last set of groups, the Post-renaissance Guru Groups are the hardest to deal with. Most have no membership figures to offer and many operate as non-membership organizations. Though a

¹ We believe this to be a generous figure, but one that can become a future beginning point for further research.

few are large international organizations with 100 or more affiliated groups in the United States. At the other extreme, some are relatively new and have but a single center of activity. A few are large internationally, but have only one or two centers within the United States.

The largest of the post-Renaissance groups are the associated activity centers built around the work of Mata Amritanandmayi (with 110 centers); the International Sai Organization headed by Satya Sai Baba (with 225 centers); Sahaja Yoga headed by Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi (with 125 centers); and the movement founded by the late Sri Chinmoy (which declined participation in this survey). Each is an international movement with many centers in the United States. While these movements have many centers, each center is relatively small. They may be as small as 3 to 5 people and rarely more than 25, with 10 to 15 an average size.

Those groups with but a single center, while a few may have more, generally have from 50 to 100 participants, though many more may be correspondents. Groups meeting in borrowed or rented facilities generally average about a dozen (5 to 25) participants. Based upon these assumptions, we can reach a total estimate of 35,000 participants in the Post-Renaissance groups.

Summary

	No. of Centers	Members/Participants
Traditional temples	248	268,000
Temple Associations	400	282,000
Renaissance groups	292	20,000
Post-Renaissance Groups	650	35,000

Adding all the figures proposed above together, we reach an estimated 606,000 active participating Hindus² in the United States as of the end of 2010. It is also difficult to assess from our present state of knowledge as to the percentage of Indian Americans included in the count. The first two groups of temples almost totally consist of Indian Americans, though a number of Westerners are to be found in a few groups such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The two latter groupings are predominantly made up of Western converts, but several of the movements, including the International Sai Organization, have received an influx of Indian members in the last few decades.

² It is noted that one movement about which only partial material has been received, and whose complete figures might measurable effect the total is the Global Country of World Peace, better known as the TM (Transcendental Meditation) movements, but it is extremely difficult to assess at present due to its rapidly changing organization in the wake of its founders' death.

