

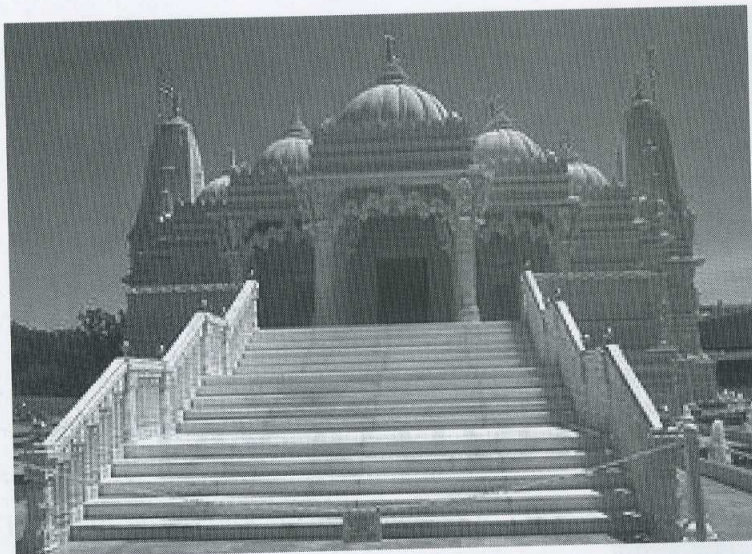
A PROPOSAL: HINDU MANDIR TIRTHA YATRA USA

*By Hiro Badlani,
M. D.*

For Hindus, visit to temples and holy places (*Tirtha Yatra*) is one of the five essential spiritual practices (*panch yajna*). Along with reading the holy scriptures (*Swadhya*), uttering God's name (*Japa*), worship (*Puja*) and rituals (*Charya*), visit to the temple (*Tirtha Yatra*) is considered as a necessary spiritual practice (*Sadhana*). Tir, which in Sanskrit translates as the other side, points toward the other non-worldly or spiritual dimension of human life. A Hindu is ordained never to outgrow these five practices, however advanced he may grow in spiritual realization. Even though the final culmination of spiritual realization comes through the transformation of the inner being (*Antahkaran*), these practices nonetheless are considered essential to reach and also to stay at the higher level. Those who claim that they have attained enough spiritual knowledge (*Jnana*) and therefore may dispense with the basic steps of the ladder with which they had climbed up, may again falter and fall, often through their own arrogance and conceit. There is also an element of divine mysticism in Hindu philosophy; we simply can not fathom the

divine power of God in many different ways. Complete surrender with full faith and in utter humility is regarded as most necessary. Indeed visiting important temples (*Tirtha Yatra*) is regarded as indispensable before one's death to obtain the salvation (*Moksha*). It is believed that temple is endowed with spiritual vibrations; visiting the temple and performing worship and other rituals may be of highest value. In India, there are many temples, which are most reputed for very strong spiritual status and full of boons for the devotees; Shri Badrinath, Shri Kedarnath, Haridwar, Benares, Shri Balaji Trupati, Vaishnodevi, Golden temple, to name just the few. People flock there in thousands round the year to obtain God's vision (*Darshan*) and divine blessings.

Last century saw an unusual flutter of activity in building the Hindu temples across most parts of the world. Wherever Hindus have migrated to settle, they have invariably invested heavily both in money and manpower to create some of the most magnificent and elegant temples. In USA and Canada there are now more than 800 Hindu temples scattered over all parts

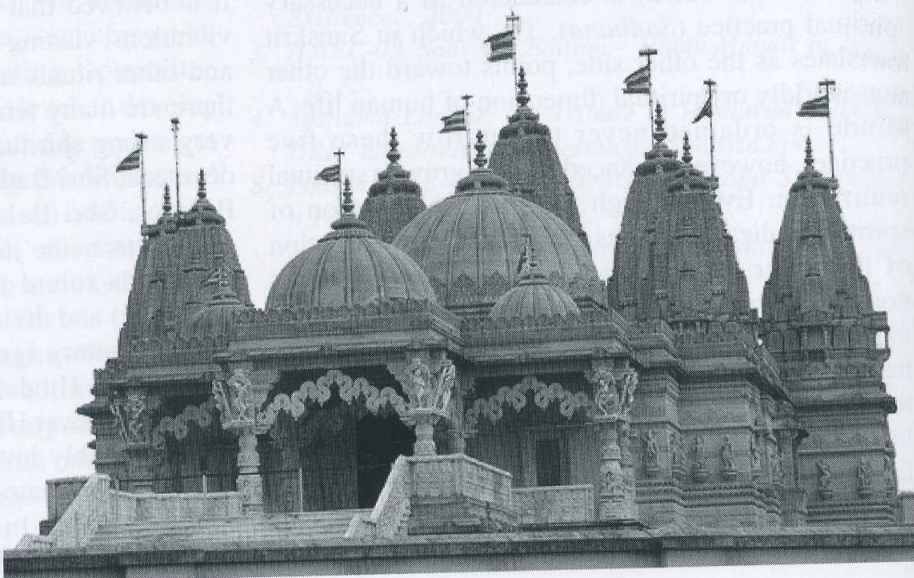


of the continent. Some of these temples are so vast and majestic that they have become the landmarks of the local cities, drawing big attention from even the non-Hindu populace. There is also a palpable force of spiritual vibrations in many of these Hindu temples as they were started by such great masters as Swami Vivekananda (Vedanta Temples), Paramhans Yogananda (Self-Realization Worship Centers), Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (Kauai Aadheenam, Hawaii), Swami Prabhupada (ISKCON Temples), Swami Chinmayananda (Chinmaya Mission), Pramukh Swami Maharaj (Swaminarayan Temples) and others. These temples have been meticulously planned and built in accordance with the ancient temple scriptures (*Agamas*).

Time is now surely ripe to organize the Hindu Mandir Yatra in USA, on a large scale, not as a substitute for pilgrimage to the Hindu temples of India, but in addition to and complimenting the Indian pilgrimage. Furthermore, it would help many Hindus in USA who may find it very difficult for various reasons to undertake the Yatra to India. In comparison, Yatra in USA could be organized economically and in comfortable manner in collaboration with the tour operators, the temples and the motel/hotel industry under the umbrella of the Hindu Mandir Association. The advantages of organizing this project are very

real and far reaching. Above anything else, the Yatra, if properly conceived and organized may become a rallying point to promote and project the universal spiritual teachings of Hinduism. Hinduism has always prided itself as being the most non-dogmatic and non-fundamental religion; our Rishis have taught the essential unity and homogeneity of all the religions (*Ekam Sad, Viprah Bahudi*). The Yatra may emphasize these values resolutely and energetically; a daily popular prayer, *Sarve Sukhi Na*—, with proper meaning and exposition may be adopted as the logo of the Yatra. The Yatra can be a big opportunity to guide and promote these Hindu values, more particularly to our younger generation Yatris.

Hindu Temple Yatra USA may be divided in 4 or more zones, each covered by coach in 7-10 days with 4-6 hours of journey each day. All arrangements for their visit should be made in advance of the visitors' arrival in co-ordination with the temple concerned. After light refreshment, the temple official or priest will conduct the tour of the temple explaining the special features, the presiding deity, and any distinctive activities and projects undertaken by the temple. If time permits, *Bhajan* singing, religious discourse and cultural program may be presented. Special puja/ darshan ceremony may be organized for the Yatris, who may be encouraged to donate generously and participate in these puja ceremonies to help the funding of the temple. The organizers may also arrange for lunch or dinner depending on the time of the day. The coach then travels to the motel/hotel



for overnight stay close to the main temple or may drive toward the next temple on the itinerary. Some flexibility may be given to the Yatris so that they can do what they would like most, instead of enforcing rigid same program for all.

Hindu Temple Yatra USA may be treated, not as a commercial venture, but basically a religious or spiritual mission, and those who would like to contribute by giving (*Dana*) their time and resources may join the band wagon. The selection of temples to be included may be done in accordance with the HMEC affiliation and other considerations. The Yatra may be projected as a Hindu community service project, not only to cater to the need for the pilgrimage to the religious places in USA and Canada, but also to educate and guide the community at large in regard of the basic Hindu values and the spiritual teachings. In fact the very purpose of these Yatras in the first place is to bring about the spiritual transformation in the persons undertaking the same. With this aim in mind, the HMEC and other major Hindu organizations may pool together to promote the "Yatra Culture", not only amongst those who join the Yatra, but all others who can be reached through the media and would access the message of the Yatra.

The elderly persons who would normally be very keen for such a pilgrimage but often find it hard to do so because of insufficient facilities, especially for going to India. Seniors who cannot afford the full price may be given subsidized discounts. They should also be treated with utmost care and respect, in accordance with Hindu tradition, so that they can do the Yatra with comfort and satisfaction. During the period schools are closed, the grand children may accompany the grand parents if proper arrangements can be made. Special discounts may be offered when the grand children wish to accompany to encourage the young to join the Yatra and give company to the elders.

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About the author : Dr. Hiro Badlani practiced ophthalmology for 40 years in Mumbai, India. After retiring, he moved to the U.S. to join his children. Dr. Badlani has dedicated the last decade, what he calls "the second inning" of his life, to the study of Hinduism and its teachings. His book, "Hinduism: Path of the Ancient Wisdom" includes all aspects of Hinduism from its very origin till the modern period, and may serve as a good guidebook for those wanting to know more about Hinduism. The author may be contacted at 562-865- 5880, E-mail: hgbadlani@aol.com



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Non-Profit Religious and Cultural Organization
11121 GLADE DRIVE
Reston, VA 20191
www.awgp.org
Phone: (703) 758-0232