



## SPECIAL FEATURE

# SPREAD OF HINDUISM AND HINDU TEMPLES IN MYANMAR (FORMER BURMA)

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### INTRODUCTION

**M**yanmar (formerly known as Burma) is located in Southeast Asia and its neighbours are China to the north and north-east; Laos to the east; Thailand to the south-east and India and Bangladesh to the west and bordering the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal and has its south and west coastlines along the Indian Ocean. Given that, Myanmar is isolated from these countries because of a horseshoe of high mountains.

The name Burma is rooted in Hinduism. Burma is the British colonial officer's phonetic equivalent for the first half of *Brahma Desha*, the ancient name of the region. *Brahma* is part of the name of Hindu Trinity, the God of Creation. The name Burma is the regional language transliteration of *Brahma*, where *b* and *m* are interchangeable.

*Arakan* (Rakhine) *Yoma* is a significant natural mountainous barrier between Burma and India, and the migration of Hinduism and Buddhism occurred slowly through *Manipur* (an ancient independent Kingdom at the India-Burma Border) and by *South Asian seaborne traders*. Hinduism greatly influenced the Royal Court of Burmese Kings in pre-colonial times, as seen in the architecture of cities such as, *Bagan*. Likewise, the Burmese language adopted many words from Sanskrit and Pali, many of which relate to religion.

Ancient and medieval arrival of ideas and cultural fusion transformed Burma over time. It was in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century that over a million Hindu workers were brought in by the British colonial government to serve in plantations and mines. The British also felt that surrounding the European residential centre with Indian immigrants provided a buffer and a degree of security from tribal theft and raids. According to 1931 census, 55% of Rangoon's (Yangon) population were Indian migrants, mostly Hindus.

After independence from Britain, Burma's Socialist Programme Party under Ne Win adopted xenophobic policies and expelled over 300,000 Indian ethnic people (many of whom were Hindus), along with 100,000 Chinese from Burma between 1963 and 1967.

Predominantly, Burmese Indians make up Myanmar's population of Hindus. The practice of Hinduism among Burmese Indians is also influenced by Buddhism. The Burmese Indians include *Myanmar Tamils, Bengalis, Odias*. The Burmese-Indian Hindu woman wearing *Bindi* is similar to the *Thanakha* (a yellowish paste) usually worn on the cheeks by ethnic Burmese.

There used to be over 1,000 Hindu temples in the present-day Myanmar. In some of the more famous temples, ethnic Burmese visitors outnumber Tamils. All Hindu temples have a statue of Buddha.

Many Tamils have deep roots in the country. They kept a low profile and slowly improved their fortunes by mending their relationship with the majority community and staying away from politics.

Aspects of Hinduism continue in Burma today, even in the majority Buddhist culture. For example, *Thagyamin* whose origins are in the Hindu God *Indra*. Burmese literature has also been enriched by Hinduism, including the Burmese adaptation of the *Ramayana*, called *Yama Zatdaw*. Many Hindu Gods are likewise worshipped by many Burmese people, such as *Saraswati*, the goddess of knowledge (known as *Thuyathadi* in Burmese, who is often wor-

shipped before examinations. *Lord Siva* is called *Paramizwa* and *Vishnu* is called *Withano* and so on. Many of these ideas are part of *thirty-seven Nass* or deities found in Burmese culture.

In modern Myanmar, most Hindus live in the urban centres of *Yangon* (Rangoon) and *Man-dalay*. Ancient Hindu temples are also present in other parts of Burma, such as the 11<sup>th</sup> century *NathlaungKyaung Temple* dedicated to *Lord Vishnu* in the old city of *Bagan*. *ISKCON* (Hare Krishna) has presence in Myanmar. The largest Hare Krishna community is in *Myitkyina* which has about 400 followers.

The city was called *Rangoon* by the British, probably stemming from the *Arakanese* pronunciation of Yangon, Rankon, but for the Burmese it has always been Yangon. The Govt. changed the name from Rangoon to Yangon in 1989.

### SOME OF THE WELL-KNOWN HINDU TEMPLES IN MYANMAR

#### 1. NathlaungKyaung Temple



This is a Hindu Temple dedicated to Lord Vishnu. This temple is located inside the city walls of old Bagan, and to the west of the *Thatbyinnyu Temple* and it is the only Hindu Temple in Bagan. This is the oldest temple and was built in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of *King Anawratha*. Some historians believe the temple was built in 10<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of *King Nyaung-u-Sawrahan* (also known as *Taungthugyi*). The temple was originally built for Hindu Burmese Indians of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, including merchants and Brahmins in the service of the king. Many structures of the original temple have disappeared, although the main hall remains. Originally the temple contained statues of the *10 Avatars of Vishnu* and *Gautama Buddha*. However, today, only seven remain. The brick temple was isolated and unrepaired for many years, damaged by earthquakes. This temple is set on a square template with steep-raising upper terraces. It may have been built by Indian artisans brought into Bagan (Pagan), during the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD, to work on it and other temples. As the oldest temple in Bagan, its style influenced and inspired the numerous other Buddhist structures that followed. The Burmese say that it was constructed by King Anawrahta to store all non-Buddhist religious images (both Burmese *nats* and Hindu *devas*) that he had collected in order to strengthen *Theravada Buddhism*. The King later gave it all to the cult of the *nat*, so goes the legend, and placed 37 chosen images at *Shwezigon Paya*. The name of the temple means "*Shrine Confining Nat*." Whenever it was built, the fact that it was not destroyed indicates the tolerance of Hinduism in Buddhist Bagan. The high Mandapa (porch that extends from the tem-

ple) was given by a *Malabar Vaishnavite Saint* in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 2. Sri Kali Amman Temple, Yangon (Rangoon)



Sri Kali Temple, a Hindu Temple is located in the undefined Little India in downtown Yangon. It was built by Indian migrants in 1871, while the Burma Province was part of British India. The temple is noted for its colourful architecture, especially its roof, which contains images and stone carvings of many Hindu Gods. The temple is maintained by the local Indian community. The structure of Sri Kali Temple is quite similar to other Hindu temples, although there may be a few more sub-works under the influence of each land, due to the financial capacity of each temple, sometimes due to political influence.

Sri Kali Temple structure is based on the principle of only a small cathedral, where the statue is placed. There is a walkway around this cathedral. This is the center of the temple. After pray-

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ing, it is necessary to go around the presbytery, so the path around the statue is the essence of the temple structure.

Shri Kali Temple was designed with symmetrically shaped figures, around a central axis, such as squares and circles. The designs make this Temple to be in a symmetric iterative structure rooted in central beliefs, myths, harmony and mathematical principles.

Four main directions help create the axis of Shri Kali Temple, forming a perfect square in available space.

Above the temple is a superstructure with a dome, which is designed as a pyramid. Many studies suggested that this shape was inspired by the mountain of the universe where the gods reign. The walls of Shri Kali Temple are intricately decorated with carvings, paintings or images to inspire believers. The pillars, walls and ceilings are often elaborately carved. The exterior of the temple is decorated completely. The form of the roof (outer wall) of the temple is often folded to accommodate more sculptures, meanwhile, the temple roof is gradually smaller, creating a strong sense of notation to emphasize the universe.

### 3. Sri Varatharaja Perumal Temple



Varatharaja Perumal Temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and is a lavishly decorated temple that dates from 1928 and was built by the Indian businessman **Dr. S. Ramantha Reddiar**. It has the classic South Indian Gopuram style of entrance tower covered with Hindu deities. The temple's main festival is a 10-day event in May-June and includes a flower procession.

### 4. Sri Ganesha Temple

Everyone calls it the Ganesha Temple, although the Tamil signboard clearly states the original name, **Siddhi Vinayaka** Temple. Siddhi Vinayaka is another name for the Elephant headed God Ganesha, and a liberal translation would be "**The God who helps you achieve your goals**". The architecture is typical Dravidian.

Its foundation dates to the 1850s when immigration from India was encouraged by the then new colonial government. A new stone inscription in the compound records that the land for the temple was given to **Cumara Pillai**, a south Indian, who constructed the temple in 1856. Such "**free grants**" were handed over to, many foreign religious communities after Yangon's

grid plan were implemented in 1853. The rituals resemble those in India, except that, devotees offer characteristic Burmese combination of bananas, green coconuts and flowers, arranged in large metal bowls. The priest recites prayers in Sanskrit before the images in three connected sanctums 'at the rear of the temple, waving a tray holding a small oil lamp (Aarthi), as worshippers stand just outside the doorway thresholds. This part of service culminates when the priest cracks open a hard-shell coconut and offers the meat to Gods and devotees, a '**ritual-food**', known in India as '**prasadam**'.

Indians came to Mandalay before Yangon, so one can guess this to be one of the older Indian temples in Myanmar. Inside this temple there are small shrines for other Hindu deities and the bronze icon of the **Monkey God Hanuman** which is really beautiful. There is a huge list of original benefactors near the entrance. It looks like a list of early Indian migrants to Burma. This is historically significant because there are Tamil names, North Indian, East Indian and Burmese names too. The list also shows Tamil names with Burmese aliases, which is interesting evidence of progressive integration between the two cultures. The priest speaks Tamil and the chants are recited both in Tamil and Sanskrit. For the Indians there is definitely a religious interest here and the links to Indian migration history more interesting.

The Sanctum has three chambers and contain the principal images. The central shrine is devoted to the '**linga**', symbolizing the God Shiva, which is flanked by His two sons, Ganesha



on the left and Subramanya or Muruga on the right. That this same configuration of deities is popular in Tamil Nadu is further testimony to the strong Tamil influence in Burma. Its namesake, **Mahapeinne**, is the Burmese word for Ganesha, derived from Maha Vinayaka, one of the God's many Sanskrit epithets. Ganesha was an important deity for Hindus in Lower Burma, and there were even Ganesha street processions in nearby Syriam in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Just inside the main entrance is a colossal image of Ganesha and a seated Shiva. Another downtown temple popular with Buddhists is the Shri Kali temple, west of the Sule, built in South Indian fashion, complete with sculpted granite doorjambs imported from India probably in 1920s.

Sacred sites south of Moulmein include a Hindu a Hindu temple just off the main road to Mudon. It is dedicated to Dandayudhapani, or the '**One Who Holds a Club**', a deity popular in South India and the son of Shiva and Parvathi.

The temple enjoys regional popularity among Hindus and Buddhists.

### 5. Peelikhan Sri Muneeswarar Temple – Yangon's Fertility Temple

The Peelikhan Sri Muneeswarar Temple or Yagon's Fertility Temple as it is also called is a Hindu Temple that was built in 1861. This gorgeous temple is located in **Kyauktan Township** on a remote road, some 6 km. away from the town itself. This temple is said to have been built at the site of a small **Banyan tree**.

Sri Muneeswarar is a Hindu God, whose name translates as **Saint**, who is typically represented as an imposing figure with a mustache who carries a spear. He is considered the protector or deity of families.

Ever since this temple opened, lots of local young women who follow Buddhism, who are unable to conceive and after trying all medical check-ups, fertility tests etc. and following Buddhist rituals and still not being able to get child, and having witnessed lots of their young Hindu women follow the Hindu version of prayers at this temple.

One of the Myanmar news paper reporters had written about a Burmese young lady, Ma May Thinzar, a trader who was frustrated in not being able to conceive and having tried everything visited this temple based on suggestion of her friend, though it was not close to where she lived. According to that report, she came to this temple and prayed saying, "**I really want to have a baby**". Over the past several years she had seen her friends becoming pregnant and hoped that it would happen to her soon enough.

After the prayers, the Brahmin (Priest) at the temple blesses the Holy Water and sprinkles over her and other devotees. Ma May Thinzar was very keen for the blessings, smiling when the ceremony was over.

In a final address to this young lady, the Brahmin orders her to come back with the child to have her child's head shaved at the temple. The Brahmin did not say, if you get a baby, since he was very confident that Sri Muneeswarar would bless her with a child.

