

Hindu temple in Tucson continues to grow

Prerana Sannappanavar

Oct 5, 2024



Hymns and chants of “Hare Rama, Hare Krishna” resound through the walls of the Iskcon temple, as devotees clad in traditional, sacred orange garb with beads around their neck sing, play instruments and dance in worship and celebration.

Joining them are South Asian families, Indian students from the University of Arizona, and Tucsonans interested in the Krishna Consciousness Movement, all clapping and swaying to the kirtan (devotional verses).

Sandamini Devi Dasi, the founder and president of the **Iskcon temple**, attired in a light blue, cotton saree (a traditional garment worn by South Asian women), has her eyes closed in veneration as she plays the manjeera (hand cymbals) in tandem with the bhajans (devotional songs).



The room is filled with idols of Hindu Gods adorned with floral garlands and traditional Indian garments, fabric, ornaments and jewelry to celebrate the Hindu festival of Janmasthanmi, which



marks the birth of Lord Krishna.

Sandamini Devi Dasi, the founder and president of the Tucson Iskcon temple, plays the manjeera (hand cymbals) in tandem with the bhajans (devotional songs) Sept. 7, at 711 E. Blacklidge Drive, Tucson, Ariz.

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In the temple's compound, children and young adults perform different forms of Indian dance, music and theatre to classical tunes on stage to a crowd of 150-200 people on a recent Sunday at the Iskcon Temple near North First Avenue and East Fort Lowell Road.

“There's so much fun, camaraderie, real connection and communion with the people and with my spirituality,” said Devi, describing her experience of joining Iskcon, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, in a conversation with the Arizona Daily Star. Dressed in a comfortable cotton kurta (Indian suit), she sits on the couch with her feet crossed in a cozy home built right next to the temple.

“It was (really) experiential – the chanting, the kirtans, finding out this incredible knowledge, (and) the food, dress and festivals. I just loved every bit of it,” she said.

Journey into Iskcon

Devi, 70, whose birth name was Sharon Cooksey, was born and raised by “conservative,” Catholic parents in Ohio. In her late teens, she began asking questions about aspects of religion, faith and God, finding that the answers being given to her within Catholicism and the Church were “more limited” than she had hoped.

“In my heart, I always loved God. I just wanted to know more about him,” said Devi. “But with Catholicism, it was more ethereal and more faith-based, instead of something really practical for myself. So, I knew there was more and I was praying to God, to Jesus, to lead me and help me develop my relationship.”

Devi’s disenchantment with the church began and developed as the focus of the larger community was on “bingo and chicken dinners than really developing your love for God,” she said. Thus, Devi said she left herself “open” to “find a way.”

“I had a good experience in the Catholic Church. I prayed to Mary regularly, went to Church every day, (and) I appreciated the ceremonies, the regulation and the focus,” said Devi. “But the questions that I had, even at a young age, just weren’t answered. You know, concrete questions about Karma, about reincarnation, they couldn’t really answer that. I just had this feeling that there was more information out there about God that somehow I wasn’t accessing yet.”





Tatiana Cueter takes part in the Kirtan, which is a collective chanting with fellow worshippers at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram, 711 E. Blacklidge Drive in Tucson, Ariz., on Sept. 22. The temple focuses on devotees to Lord Krishna, who are a mix of Indians who are Hindus and non-Indians.

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In 1973, at the age of about 19 in Cincinnati, Ohio, Devi met a group of Iskcon devotees for the first time and was given a Bhagavad Gita, a Hindu scripture or holy

text which delves into religious philosophies and ideologies. Upon reading the Bhagavad Gita and texts on Vedic philosophy, she was introduced to the deeper ideas of life, rebirth, spirituality and the individual's relationship with God.

“When I started reading Vedic philosophy, Catholicism made so much more sense to me,” said Devi. “It was a real education of seeing everything through the eyes of the ancient Vedic books of wisdom. It didn't criticize anyone else, it just pointed out how the goal of all religions are the same – to love God, to know God, to have a relationship with God, and then ultimately go back to God.”

Post her introduction to the religion and the movement, she first went to Los Angeles to the Iskcon temple there, and then settled in San Diego for about 12 years. During this time, she periodically visited India as well. In the initial years of her participation, she stayed with friends but contributed her services to the temples and the community.

Finally, in January 1975, Devi took a leap of faith and moved into the temple. The same year, she was initiated by a spiritual guru into the Krishna Consciousness path, whose basic



Kirtanesvara Gauranga Dasa, a monk, talks about dharma and karma to worshippers at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram, 711 E. Blacklidge Drive in Tucson, Ariz., on Sept. 22. The temple focuses on devotees to Lord Krishna, who are a mix of Indians who are Hindus and non-Indians.

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principles are vegetarianism, forbidden intoxication, forbidden unrestricted and illicit lust and sex, and forbidden gambling.

Establishment of the Tucson Iskcon Temple

In 1987, Devi and her then-husband established the Tucson Iskcon Temple, the first temple dedicated to Lord Krishna in Tucson, said Devi.

Five years later, in 1992, **Govinda's**, the natural foods restaurant attached to the temple, as well as the adjoining India Imports Boutique which sells an array of traditional clothes and jewelry, sacred pictures and idols, spiritual books, singing bowls, natural soaps, healing oils and incense, were both added.

The Indian and Hindu community, since the establishment of the temple to today, has gradually grown, she said, saying there were about 200 families then, which have now grown to over 2000.

Pima County had a total of 12 congregations and 2,935 adherents for the Hindu Yoga and Meditation body, and 1 congregation and 1,731 adherents for the Hindu Temples body, according to a 2020 survey by **U.S. Religion Census** last updated in June 2023.

In terms of funding and resources for the temple's functioning and the numerous festival celebrations, the restaurant brings in 70% of the income, the boutique brings in 20% and about 10% come from donations, said Devi. Additionally, there are certain times when devotees part of the temple will sponsor an entire event, festival or

celebration if it is of personal significance to them.

The temple hosts a plethora of Hindu festivals from Ganesh Chaturti (celebration of Lord Ganesha), Janmashthami (festival celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna), Diwali (festival of lights), Ram Navmi (festival celebrating the birth of Lord Rama), Holi (festival of colors) and Mahashivratri (celebration of Lord Shiva).

The temple also holds non-Hindu festivities, including Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations at the restaurant, as well as more secular holidays such as New Year's Eve, Mother's Day and Father's Day.





Taralakshi Gopi, left, takes part in the artika, a devotional dance, with other worshippers at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram, 711 E. Blacklidge Drive in Tucson, Ariz., on Sept. 22. The temple focuses on devotees to Lord Krishna, who are a mix of Indians who are Hindus and non-Indians.

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The Krishna Consciousness Movement

The goal of the Krishna Consciousness Movement is about “accept(ing) Krishna as the supreme” as he is the “supreme personality of God,” said Devotee Bhakti Raj Das, the Vice President of the Tucson Iskcon temple, who is originally from Nepal.

Das, who lived a “typical ashram (hermitage) life” in a gurukul (an ancient schooling system where pupils lived in the guru’s home), was raised and educated within the movement in India.

“The goal of our movement and our training is to promote God consciousness to the world, and that’s through bhakti (devotion),” said Das. “We practice bhakti yoga, (which is) yoga that connects to God with true devotion. It’s a part of life. Whenever we’re not doing anything else, we’re just meditating, chanting, preaching, bringing awareness of Lord Krishna to everybody.”

Jamuna Paudel, 15, Das’ niece who was also born into the movement through her

parents and family, reiterated Devi's experience of the movement answering the deeper questions of life, religion and faith. Paudel also addressed the difference in Lord Krishna's image and persona in comparison to other Gods, saying his playfulness, mischievousness, youth and beauty make him more accessible and attractive to young adults like her.

"I like to say he (Krishna) is my friend, my best friend," said Paudel, dressed in a brown and white traditional lehenga (full-length skirt) during the weekly kirtan celebrations every Sunday. "He's very beautiful, youthful (and) more personal."

Speaking of the larger Krishna Consciousness Movement and the participation of non-Hindus and non-South Asians in it, Dhiro Datta, Devi's now husband, said the current, pervading culture of the world being "sensual" satisfies the body, but isn't enough to satisfy the soul and the spirit. Thus, individuals are attracted to "concepts and practices conducive to 'the truth,'" he said.



"Now, more people consider themselves spiritual than religious because they feel religion has certain dogmas and titles they don't wanna be attached to," said Devi. "Those are people who want to experience spirituality without the confines of traditional churches." ❌

Devotees gather at the Tucson Iskcon temple to celebrate the Hindu festival of Ganesh Chaturthi Sept. 7, at 711 E. Blacklidge Drive, Tucson, Ariz.

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Devotee Kirtanesvar Das, whose main services at the temple include teaching and counseling, said he's never met anyone who's as "extraordinarily

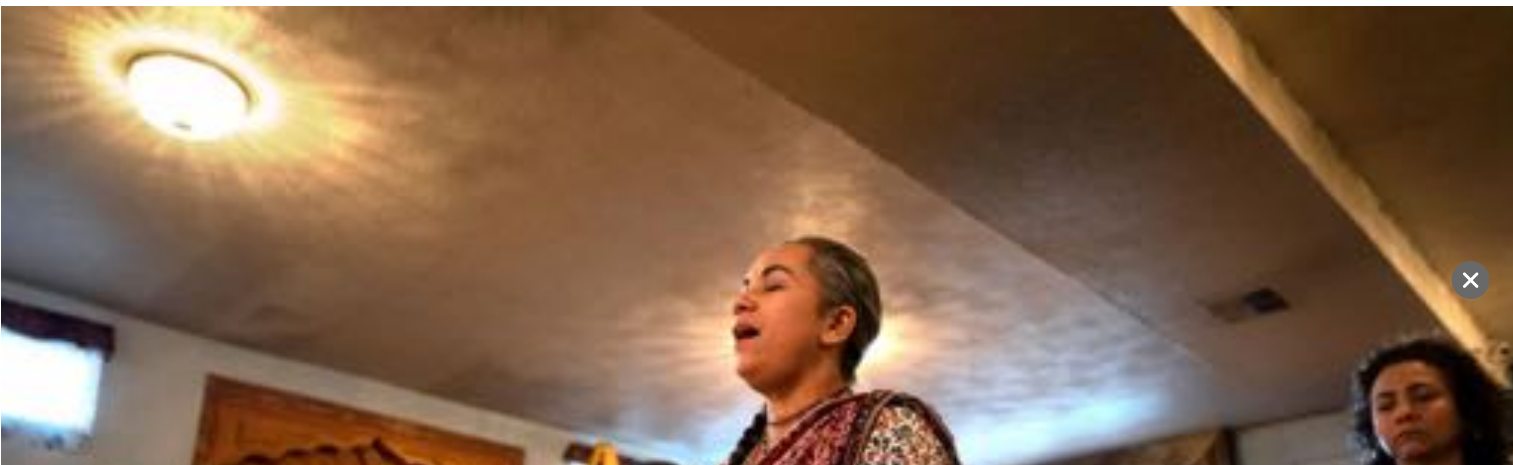
happy, extraordinarily detached, (and) extraordinarily conscious" as the devotees he meets in his Iskcon journey.

"After hitting a rock bottom place, I decided I need to give my life to God, because I always wanted to help people, help their spirit," said Das, who was also raised in the Catholic Church like Devi and was attracted to the movement through his curiosity for the deeper meanings in life and faith.

"We can heal the body, but the body's still going to die. But to heal the spirit, that's a change of life," he said.

Photos: ISKCON Tucson Temple and the Krishna Consciousness Movement

ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram





Tatiana Cueter takes part in the Kirtan, which is a collective chanting with fellow worshippers at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram on September 22, 2024.

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ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram





Kirtanesvara Gauranga Dasa, a monk, talks about dharma and karma to worshippers at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram on September 22, 2024.

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ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram





Tarakshi Gopi, left, takes part in the artika, a devotional dance, with other worshippers at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram on September 22, 2024.

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ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram



Steven Castillo takes part in the Kirtan, which is a collective chanting with fellow worshippers at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram on September 22, 2024.

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ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram





Uriel Shalom, right, takes part in the Kirtan, which is a collective chanting with fellow worshippers at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram on September 22, 2024.

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ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram





Devotees take part in the artika, a devotional dance, at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram on September 22, 2024.

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ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram



Rama Gopala, a priest, holds up a candle to offer prayer as an image of Lord Krishna and the woman he is most often depicted with, Radha, are in the background at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram on September 22, 2024.

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ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram



Rama Gopala, a priest, left, stands by the main alter during a worship service at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram on September 22, 2024.

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ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram





Worshippers bend down in prayer at the ISKCON Tucson Krishna Temple & Ashram on September 22, 2024.

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