

# DECODING A HINDU TEMPLE: Toronto's Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) Shri Swaminarayan Mandir and the *Mandala* as a Principle of Design

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Like Hindu religion, Hindu temples represent more than a stone edifice and silhouettes of the iconic *sikhara*, which literally means “mountain peak” and is usually translated as “spire.” For the most part, this religion and its celebratory structures are barely understood in the Western World. Hindus are generally around thirteen percent of the world’s population and Hinduism is the third largest religion after Islam and Christianity. Hindus derive their name from the Indus valley, known to many as *Sind*, *Sindu* (as in *Sapta Sindu*, the land of seven rivers), or Hindu; that is, Indus names were given by outsiders to people living beyond the Indus valley in the Indian subcontinent. The British occupation changed the lingo from Indus to India.<sup>1</sup> Hence, Hinduism is a relatively new term, but the religion it coins is one of the oldest surviving practiced religions in the world—around three thousand years.<sup>2</sup> It is a way of life that is embodied within the various religious practices that constitute the daily life of the people. It also presents an array of deities that are prayed to in varied degrees of importance based on the activities of the community to which a devotee belongs. Even with these variations, Hindus respect and support the religious practices of each other and are very open to participation in ceremonies associated with deities not being prayed to within their household but generally within the community.

A deeper study of Hindu practices gives us a better appreciation of how religion may have been celebrated in other long-lost religions, like the Hellenes of antiquity. According to the Hindu philosophy of



FIG. 1. FRONT FAÇADE OF BAPS TEMPLE IN TORONTO. | COPYRIGHT HELD BY BAPS SWAMINARAYAN SANSTHA ([WWW.BAPS.ORG], [INFO@BAPS.ORG]); UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER, CC BY-SA 3.0 [HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-SA/3.0], VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.