

WHY INDIA'S VISA TEMPLES ARE STILL THRIVING

Indians are now among the largest recipients of visas globally. That hasn't stopped devotees from turning to Hindu sites to remove obstacles.



Indian Hindu devotee Rajashekar Reddy (R) receive his passport after it is blessed by a priest at the Chilkur Balaji Temple in Rangareddy, some 30 kms from Hyderabad, on April 29, 2017 (NOAH SEELAM/AFP via Getty Images)

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Potted plants dot the walkway leading into a small, first-floor Hanuman temple in South Delhi. A few devotees cover their heads, lying prostrate before the idols inside. Neera Sharma, a U.S.-based architect, and her mother are coming out after offering prayers. Following Sharma's studies in the U.S., she applied for the elusive H-1B visa to stay on and work there. But, in 2019 and 2021, Sharma wasn't lucky enough to get one.

Sharma had always considered herself spiritual. So, in 2021, she jumped at the chance to visit this particular Hanuman temple, where visa applicants went to pray. A few months later, she got the O-1 visa, for those with extraordinary abilities and achievements. "It's a hard visa to get — they really scrutinize you," she said, referring to the O-1. Despite her initial sadness over her lost H-1B, she admitted: "I managed to do better." Though grateful to Hanuman, she knew she had also made her own efforts.

India is officially secular, but religion permeates every aspect of life. With so many uncertainties in the immigration process, for the truly desperate, belief is a crutch on which to hang their hope — even when the odds are increasingly in their favor.

India is the largest country of origin for H-1B approvals, followed by China and Canada

Top countries of birth for approved H-1B visas, 2022

	Number	Portion
Total	441,502	100%
India	320,791	72.6%
China	55,038	12.5%
Canada	4,235	1.0%
South Korea	4,097	0.9%
Philippines	3,501	0.8%
Mexico	3,203	0.7%
Taiwan	3,016	0.7%
Brazil	2,521	0.6%
Pakistan	2,505	0.6%
Nepal	2,057	0.5%

Source: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

India is largest country of origin for H-1B visa approvals (The Juggernaut)

India is a large source of work and student visas worldwide. Indians account for **more than 10% of all visa applicants worldwide to the U.S.**, including 20% of all student visa applicants and 65% of all employment-related applicants. In 2022, **over 118,000 Indians** became Canadian permanent residents, nearly a third of the total inflow into the country. Meanwhile, over 40% of international students in the country were Indian. Indians also **dominated** for work and student visas the U.K. tallies in 2022.

"The U.S. visa regime caps the number of work visas granted each year. For instance, the H-1B visa system restricts it to 85,000, and that's heavily oversubscribed every year," said Gaurav Khanna, an assistant professor of economics at the University of California, San Diego who specializes in high-skill immigration and education policy.

Immigration to the West symbolizes better opportunities. "Even high-wage tech workers in India get a 400% raise when they move to the U.S., so getting that visa is like winning a lifetime lottery ticket, and drives a lot of that desperation," said Khanna.

In Sharma's case for instance, after an education in the U.S., it made sense for her to work there too, said her mother Neeta Sharma. "At the time she was looking for a job, the architecture field in India was not flourishing," she said. "There were fewer prospects and less scope compared to the U.S."

Visa issuances for the U.S. have increased at Indian consulates, in part due to backlogs

Number of visa approvals

Source: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services; Visa Grader

H-1B visa issuances (The Juggernaut)

Though policies under the Donald Trump administration tightened visa approvals, the Biden administration has improved processes. In 2020, Trump **suspended the H-1B and other work visas**. But, in 2023, the Biden administration **enabled** the domestic renewal of certain visas and **improved** the interview process.

But improved odds haven't seemed to dampen the relevance of visa temples. The nondescript Hanuman Temple that Sharma visited has acquired the nickname "visa temple." But this isn't India's only one. Shrines in honor of other deities in other cities have developed similar reputations, although none are connected to each other. There are "visa temples" in Hyderabad, Chennai, Ahmedabad, and Punjab, to name just a few.

In Delhi, pages upon pages of the temple's guest book contain testimonies of those who either got a visa after visiting or hope to get one. "With the blessings of the Lord, I got the chance to go to Canada. My application was first refused, now it got approved," said one entry scrawled in red ink. "Thanks to you, our visa for the U.S. came through and we will soon leave...We hope to stay there and live there happily," read another.

The priests here have no idea how the legend of the Hanuman visa temple started. But they recommend a set of prayers, and claim that at least 90% of visitors have their wishes granted. "There is nothing that Hanuman cannot do," said Narayan Mishra, 26, one of the priests. "We are also thrilled when people's wishes are fulfilled."

These odds aren't too surprising: in 2022, the U.S. accepted **roughly 73% of H-1B applicants from India** and **about 80-95% of O-1 applications overall**.

The southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana account for a large chunk of skilled migration to the U.S. each year. Between 2010 and 2017, native Telugu speakers **surged by 86%** in the U.S., and the U.S. opened its largest Asian consulate in Hyderabad last year. The 500-year-old Chilkur Balaji temple, which people now call the Visa Balaji temple, sits on the shores of **Osman Sagar Lake in Hyderabad**. Its reputation developed in the late 1990s, according to convener and temple trustee C.S. Gopalakrishnan. People circumambulate the inner sanctum 108 times, an auspicious number, if their wish is fulfilled.

"I was told it works here," said Mahesh Shivanna, 47, a software professional who first came in 2011 from Bangalore. "I had a visa to lose." After two H-1B rejections, he "had almost given up hope" but, within a few months of visiting Chilkur Balaji, his third application went through. "There is something even more powerful about this place," he said, on a recent visit. "I feel very reassured when I come to pray here." Since then, he has spread the word.

It's not just work visas — tourist visa applicants also throng some of these temples.

Chennai resident Vidya Nagi had a tourist visa rejection reversal shortly after she went to Chilkur Balaji, which she visits religiously every time she is in Hyderabad. Her daughter's Canadian residency permit also came through after a visit here. Other family members have also had their wishes fulfilled after setbacks. "There is something really special about that temple, it gives me a wonderful feeling every time I go there," she said. "It's not crowded, it's not commercialized, the priest is wonderful and there is no special treatment for VIPs."

These temples have built their reputations over the years, largely through word-of-mouth. In most cases, one or two successful stories that traveled and burnished the name of the temples. "Even non-believers come here sometimes, and then when they find a miracle has taken place, they also become believers," said Rupang Mehta, a trustee of the Ahmedabad Visa Hanuman temple, which has been in his family for 10 generations.

As with the others, Ahmedabad's Visa Hanuman temple's popularity surged about 15 years ago, when one family's wishes for their children to go abroad came true. "Parents especially are very concerned about the future of their children and believe there is greater scope for them abroad," said Mehta. The temple asks the visa aspirant or relative to come with the passport and do a small two- or three-minute ritual. Priests then advise them to repeat a set of prayers every day until their wish comes true. After that, if they wish, they donate anywhere from under ₹500 (\$6), to ₹5,000 (\$60) to the temple.

These temples have also converted some skeptics. Vidhu Sharma, a homemaker from Gurgaon who describes herself as devout, said she refused to believe in the power of a temple to grant a visa. "You write a note with your wish on it, and it comes true — how can that work?" she shared. "I believe in God but not in such whimsical things." Nonetheless, after a tourist visa rejection to Canada in 2017, she went to the Delhi temple at a friend's suggestion and got a visa in 15 days. Now, she has become a proselytizer, and sends everyone with a deeply-held wish to pray at the temple.

Some of the visa temples are capitalizing on this phenomenon. The Ganapathi temple in Chennai has even incorporated the word "visa" on its official home page, and uses the domain name **visatemple.com**. The introduction to the Ahmedabad Temple's homepage **visatemple.com**: "Do any of your relatives, friends, or acquaintances in India wish to go to Canada, USA, Australia, England, or any other country?? Do they find themselves making innumerable visits to the visa office without any result?" It goes on to say, "There is no need to get disappointed or depressed at all. There is only one place you must visit" — the "visa wala Hanumanji."

The deities at these visa temples vary, from Balaji in Hyderabad to Ganesh in Chennai. But one deity comes up again and again, in Delhi, Chennai, and Ahmedabad: Hanuman. "Hanuman is one of the most popular deities across the Hindu world due to his role as a genius with miraculous powers for healing and helping, especially in emergency situations," said Pankaj Jain, co-editor of the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Religions*. At the Hanuman Temple in Delhi, one priest said that Hanuman could be considered the first international traveler. He famously flies to Sri Lanka before the start of battle in the *Ramayana*.

Hinduism has no central institutional authority, and practices and beliefs evolve. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, several temples dedicated to "corona" deities **popped up**. Divinities have also **emerged** during other outbreaks of disease.

"Hinduism did not begin at a fixed time, nor did it have any founders, nor a set of definite scriptures," said Jain. "In the entire South Asian region, people discovered their interpretations of reality in their ways, languages, and versions of deities." Visa temples, then, are organic developments in response to a contemporary reality.

"Faith traditions worldwide have consistently been tied with desires for better socioeconomic lives of their practitioners," said Jain. "Desire to migrate in the 21st century has exploded worldwide with floods of migrants and immigrants on every continent. Local faith practices naturally help people as they pursue greener pastures thousands of miles away."

Jain said there was no contradiction in educated employees or tech workers turning to the gods, and that many "Indian scientists are devout Hindus, exemplified by recent moon and other missions which happened only after rituals at local temples." For instance, the chief of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) S. Somnath **visited** a temple both before and after a recent **successful lunar mission**. But he was not alone. ISRO officials have **also visited** temples before launching satellites, ensuring that launch dates do not fall on inauspicious dates. Though they may seem contradictory, rationality and religion are closely linked in India.

There is no evidence that these temples work, or official data on the success rate of applicants who visit — and it's hard to consider them successful as the odds of getting visas to the U.S. keep improving. But India's visa temples give people hope. "It's all about belief, and having something to believe in, given the uncertainties of the visa process," said Nagi. "It might not make a difference but it gives you something to hold on to, a sense of confidence."

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