

Divine Intervention? Indians Seek Help From the 'Visa God'

Priest Says Prayers May Aid
Those Trying to Enter U.S.;

A Job With Amazon.com

By VAUHINI VARA

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HYDERABAD, India -- Lord Balaji is one of the most-worshiped local incarnations of the Hindu Lord Vishnu. His adherents flock to his many temples to pray for things like happiness, prosperity and fertility.

Lately, the deity has grown particularly popular at the once-quiet Chilkur Balaji temple here, where he goes by a new nickname: the Visa God. The temple draws 100,000 visitors a week, many of whom come to pray to Lord Balaji for visas to travel or move to the U.S. and other Western countries.

Mohanty Dolagobinda is one of the Visa God's believers. Three years ago, a U.S. consulting company applied for a visa on his behalf. It was rejected. When the company tried again the following year, Mr. Dolagobinda's friends told him to visit the Chilkur Balaji temple ahead of his interview at the U.S. consulate. Weeks later, he sailed through the interview. "I've never heard of anyone who's gone to the temple whose visa got rejected," says Mr. Dolagobinda.



Chilkur Balaji Temple

Visitors to the Chilkur Balaji temple wait in line to pray to Lord Balaji, the 'Visa God.'

In the late 1990s, this small temple on the outskirts of Hyderabad -- the capital of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh -- drew just two or three visitors a week.

C.S. Gopala Krishna, the 63-year-old head priest of the Chilkur Balaji Temple, wanted more people to come. So he gave Lord Balaji a new identity. "I named him the Visa God," he says. Now, Mr. Gopala Krishna's temple is a hot spot. Billboards on the dirt road to the temple advertise English-language schools and visa

advisers. Next to the parking lot, vendors hawk souvenirs and fruit.

The Visa God's growing celebrity reflects the rising frustration of educated Indians hoping to move West. In recent years, it's become harder to win the employer-sponsored "H-1B" visas that let skilled professionals like engineers work in the U.S. While the U.S. limits the number of H-1Bs granted each year to 65,000, the demand for visas keeps rising.

For the fiscal year ended September 2004, it took 11 months for the U.S. government to receive 65,000 applications for H-1B visas; last fiscal year, it took two months. This fiscal year, the U.S. government received more than 65,000 applications in one day. Applications are now assigned a random number, and the first 90,000 to 110,000 are processed and accepted or rejected until the quota is reached.

Technology Hub

Hyderabad, a city of seven million once known for its pearl trade, has become a fast-growing technology hub. Indian citizens have been the biggest group of H-1B holders in recent years and Hyderabad has forged ties to U.S. companies such as Microsoft Corp., which employ large numbers of H-1Bs. Companies such as Accenture Ltd. and Dell Inc. have also set up huge development and service centers in the city. That's brought a cultural shift, as young middle-class locals replace traditional Indian clothing with jeans and T-shirts and hang out at newly opened malls and coffee shops.

On a recent Saturday evening, as a statue of the flower-draped Visa God sat at the back of the modest temple, a cross-legged Mr. Gopala Krishna took responsibility for the visa fervor. Around him, visitors were speed-walking, heads down, as they made the necessary 11 circles around the temple to gain the favor of the Visa God. The temple was about to close, and some visitors broke into a jog.

"At other temples, elders bring their children," says Mr. Gopala Krishna. "In this temple, children bring their elders."

He was born at the temple, where his father was once head priest, and later left to live with relatives in Hyderabad. Mr. Gopala Krishna studied commerce in college and in 1968 started working at Hindustan Lever, a consumer-products giant. In 1999, he came back to the temple to take care of his father, and then became the head priest himself.

At the time, the temple attracted few visitors. "The temple has been there for at least 100 years with nobody visiting," says Ravi Babu, a longtime Hyderabad resident who runs the local chapter of the Indus Entrepreneurs, a club for entrepreneurs.

Wooing Microsoft

By then, Hyderabad was changing. Local officials were on a tear to turn Hyderabad into the next Bangalore, the high-tech capital of the neighboring state of Karnataka. They started referring to Hyderabad as "Cyberabad." They fixed roads and wooed Microsoft and General Electric Co. to set up offices there.

Hoping to capitalize on all the activity, technical colleges sprouted up in the city's outskirts near Mr. Gopala Krishna's temple. Students started trickling by on their way home from school; many complained about their failed attempts to secure U.S. visas. That gave the priest an idea to sell the students on the deity by giving him a new persona, "Visa God." Mr. Gopala Krishna counseled the students in English, then told them to

walk around the temple 11 times to get their wish. "I used to say, 'Go, this time you'll get it,'" he recalls.

Soon, Mr. Gopala Krishna started seeing dozens -- then hundreds -- of new visitors a day. In 2005, some local newspapers wrote about the Visa God, just as new U.S. visa restrictions were taking a toll. Mr. Gopala Krishna and his relatives also launched a Web site and a newsletter called Voice of Temples, with features like a primer of sample prayers for help in visa interviews.

The temple's popularity surged. Last year, a public battle between Mr. Gopala Krishna's family and the local government, which briefly wanted to take the temple over, only boosted its appeal among the young and subversive. Now devotees of the Visa God say they have to reach the temple by 6 a.m. to avoid the daytime rush.

Rajendra Vippagunta, a 28-year-old now working for Amazon.com Inc. in Seattle, visited the temple in 2001 and saw few others. On a more recent visit, he says, "it was really, really jam-packed." Mr. Vippagunta didn't know about the Visa God the first time he visited the temple, but it may have had an effect anyway: The following year, he got a visa to move to the U.S.

Mr. Babu of the Indus Entrepreneurs says the appeal of the Visa God boils down to the following: "Even if you're not religious, you say, 'Why not? I can just go and spend a few minutes and get a visa,'" he says.

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