



KALMAN ZABARSKY

Growing Pains for BU's Hindus

Increasing recognition, but where to gather?

THE FIRST SIGN of reverence is the 100 shoes outside the School of Theology room. Inside, their 50 owners sit on the carpeted floor as incense perfumes the air near a table draped in white and splashed with colorful *murtis* (icons) of Hindu deities, including Ganesh, dispatcher of obstacles. (Traders chant his many names at the start of business each day on the Bombay Stock Exchange.)

The festival of dance drew more than 1,000 people, dwarfing regular worship attendance.

Beside the table sit a married Hindu priest and priestess from Lexington, Mass., brought in to lead this late-February celebration of the festival of the god Shiva.

They open by leading the group in a gentle chant, accompanied by tambourine and hand drum. Each worshipper has a plastic plate and bowl with ritual items. They will sprinkle themselves with water, anoint the person next to them with vermilion

powder, and braid that person's wrist with thread.

Hinduism has the oldest scriptures of any religion, the greatest number of adherents after Christianity and Islam, and a burgeoning BU presence, estimated at more than 350 students. This year, the University appointed its first Hindu campus minister.

Meanwhile, an on-again-off-again campaign to find a designated prayer space is on again. Currently, students bounce between the School of Theology and a borrowed basement room in Marsh Chapel for Saturday prayer.

Regular worship attendance is dwarfed by special events; last fall's *rasa lila*, a festival of dance, drew more than 1,000 people to the Metcalf Ballroom, says Pratik Desai (CAS'12).

Such community outreach won BU's Hindu students the best chapter award last year from the New Jersey-based Hindu Students Council, which promotes Hindu culture. BU's Hindu contingent is the largest of that council's 60 campus members.

Yet with growth comes growing

↑ **BU HINDUS** gather for worship at the School of Theology.

pains. Marsh sometimes needs its basement for special events, and the students must scramble for an alternate venue. "Sometimes, we don't know where we're going to be that week," says Desai, former copresident of the BU Hindu Council. Even if Marsh is available, the largest turnouts, which can hit 100, stretch the basement's seams.

Then there's the theological problem: the opportunity for the faithful to view icons is a central tenet of Hinduism that's affronted by the current need to store them in a locked basement closet. "We've broken a lot of them in transport, and the fact that they're in a closet is sacrilegious," says Desai. "If you go to a temple, they'll be on an altar, and they're treated just like people. So the priest will put them down to go to sleep every night."

Helping with the search is new campus minister Pandit Ramadheen Ramsamooj. A lecturer at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, and headmaster of a New Hampshire private school, he's at BU part-time, serving students as needed for counseling and worship. In addition to nailing down a designated worship spot, he'd like to start a scholarship fund for Hindu students from poor nations to attend BU, financed by the University's Hindu alumni.

RICH BARLOW