

## [Ganesha Unites California Hindus](#)

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## 20 Bay Area Hindu Organizations Join Forces for the First Time Ever to Celebrate the Golden Gate Ganesha Visarjana

At last, the priest performed the invocation ceremony. As he rang the bell and raised the champhor flame, fourteen coconuts slammed hard and burst open upon a kolam-decorated cement slab, cutting the early morning calm with a penetrating crackle. As if on cue, the music began with the strident nagaswaram, followed by the thunder and "spike" of the thavil drum. The crowd roared, "Jai, Ganapati, Jai." After several hours of waiting and preparation, Lord Ganapati's magisterial procession to the sea was finally under way.

On that early Sunday morning, September 25, more than 20 Bay Area Hindu temples and organizations joined forces to produce a Hindu festival that would be attended by thousands. Several people remarked that only Lord Ganesha, the "God of Harmony" and the honored Deity of the occasion, could have devised such an accomplishment.

The Ganesha Visarjana (Hindi for "departure") marks the close of ten days of celebration begun on Ganesha Chaturthi, the fourth day in the month of Avani, Ganesha's birthday. It is a ceremony of fond farewell to a beloved god. Clay images of Ganesha specifically prepared for the event, are ceremoniously dissolved in the ocean, signifying Ganesha's return to all pervasive consciousness. It has been celebrated as a religious festival for thousands of years, becoming a public, community-wide event early in this century in Maharashtra, India. It now draws many participants in India, especially in Bombay and Pune.

The GGGV began with a procession featuring Akili the elephant, 14 uniquely fashioned palanquins carrying colorful Ganesha murthis made of clay, two parade musicians playing the nagaswaram and thavil, four 20-foot banners highlighting 16 forms of Lord Ganesha, six flag-carrying Hindu Boy Scouts and hundreds of others Hindu and non-Hindu participants coming and going along the way. This charming

and picturesque caravan ended its half-mile journey at the Baker Beach Battery Chamberlin (constructed by the Army before World War I as a strategic defense facility). The palanquins were majestically drawn up and stationed side-by-side like chariots on clouds across the uppermost tier of the Battery overlooking the blue waters of the Pacific Ocean, all against the epic backdrop of the famous Golden Gate Bridge. All agreed that it was a stunningly appropriate spot for Lord Ganesha's best-ever-in-the-USA farewell ceremony.

Here, following pujas to each murthi, a rich cultural program provided a variety of events from Karnatic singing and Bharata Natyam dancing to formal speeches, Ganesha murthi decorating and, of course, lunch. Some of the finest students from more than a dozen Bay Area music and dance schools participated in the cultural presentations and transformed the gathering into a elegant pageant to Hinduism's glorious cultural heritage. Plenty of sumptuous rice and curry was available, and numerous vending stands displayed a wide assortment of Hindu religious items, especially literature - including Hinduism Today.

At three o'clock the main puja began. It was conducted by the Bay Area's own Swami Omkarananda and lasted about an hour. Afterwards, enthusiastic anticipation mounted for another procession - this time a shorter one, just down the hill and into the ocean. But the spirit had been growing all day long, and everyone was ebullient. Bells, conch, nagaswaram and thavil again marked a change of pace. A throbbing repetition of "Jai Jai Jai Gananayaka" intermeshed in almost maddening confusion with "Om Ganapati, Jai Jai Ganapati" as many other songs and chants spontaneously burst forth from crowded clusters of people gathered informally here and there. It seemed like the pulsating roar of the crowd's devotion raised the palanquins of its own accord to carry them forth to the water's edge. Like a wave, the masses of people flooded down the hill to the sea.

Although only a few people had prepared themselves with scuba diver's wet suits to brave the frigid sea and escort the murthis to their watery destination, the high spirit of the event thrust several others, including some of the priests into the water to lend a helping hand. Even some ladies, dressed fastidiously in saris, romped about in the cold surf like children. At just the perfect time, a helicopter whirled into view, circled twice over the floating gods and showered a avalanche of rose petals to bid a divine farewell.

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