

## [Perth Hindu Temple A Triumph For Devotees](#)

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# Perth Hindu Temple A Triumph For Devotees

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Perth is the most remote city in Australia, and one of the most isolated in the world. But a strong and dedicated Hindu community is building a temple in this city perched on a western coast overlooking 5,880 miles of Indian Ocean stretching unbroken to the distant shores of Africa and separated from the nearest Australia city, Adelaide, by 1,400 miles of desert to the east. Their 30-year story is a tale of the triumph of cooperation in diversity.

Dr. V. Kulaendra, President of the Hindu Temple Association of Western Australia, was introduced to me as "one of the people most in touch with the history and sentiments of Perth Hindus." During a Saturday afternoon conversation lasting several hours, he ranges over many topics, polishing each with a series of vignettes, fascinating insights into the transplantation and consolidation of Hindus in Perth. The earliest communal Hindu prayers in Perth were held in the Australian-Asia House of the Australian Asian Association in the late 1960s by a variety of groups who rented the facility.

The association closed in 1979 and stimulated the Tamil community to search for a meeting point, a cultural refuge they could call their own. This led to the birth of the Tamil Association of Western Australia, which played a crucial part in the maintenance and evolution of Hindu beliefs, traditions and institutions in Perth. Several of its members were later founding members of the Hindu Temple Association.

During those formative years, a number of individual Hindus made distinctive contributions to the embryonic Western Australian Hindu community. Early satsangs were held in the Muruga shrine of the "Saravana Villa" - home of Mr.

Ramadas Annamalay and his wife, who migrated from Malaysia in 1974. The shrine was a second-floor addition to the home built after his non-Hindu brother had a very powerful dream while staying with the family. "We knew immediately what was expected of us," he remarks. "The extension cost US \$35,700 which was a financial strain, but when religious obligations are involved, the money just has to be found." All Muruga festivals are celebrated in the house, especially Thaipusam. "Even now," says Mr. Annamalay, "this is probably the only place in Australia where kavadi penance is taken."

Behind much of Perth Hindu growth is the guiding hand of Swami Shantanand Saraswati, formerly of the Sivananda Ashram of South India, and now a roving sannyasin based in Malaysia. In 1981 he celebrated Navaratri at Pelican Point on the banks of the Swan River. The much publicized event attracted a substantial crowd, many of whom were not-Hindus. The gathering also aroused some local ire, especially among those who felt threatened by the influx of foreign spiritual figures and tourists. There were also detractors within the local Hindu community. The Tamil Association and other groups felt it necessary to conduct their own Navaratri celebrations.

Then in 1982 Sai Baba satsangs began, the Ramakrishna Mission in 1985 and, Dr. Kulaendra comments, "by the end of 1985 there were four main Hindu groups, mainly meeting the needs of South Indian communities. North Indians held no regular prayer sessions, and only occasional gatherings. What was on public offer at that time did not really meet their needs." There were also conflicts, overlaps, and a range of contradictory opinions within various communities. "Relations at that time were far from harmonious," remarks Dr. Kulaendra drily.

In 1986, Mr. Shankar Madan, a geologist, sounded out the idea of establishing a temple. At the first meeting about 15 devotees pledged a total of US \$8,000. Another meeting of 300 people endorsed the proposal, resolved that the temple would contain all major Deities, named it the Hindu Temple of Perth, and established the Hindu Temple Association of Western Australia. There were elements within the Indian community who opposed the project. Dr. Kulaendra observes, "About 20-30 families saw no need for a temple. These people felt that the best future for their children lay in rapid assimilation into the dominant Anglo-Saxon majority."

With virtually every Hindu family donating, a five-acre vacant lot was acquired at

the recommendation of Swami Shantanand who agreed to donate two icons, Devi-Shakti, which arrived during Navaratri 1986. The Siva Lingam was carved in Perth itself. Dr. Kulaendra comments, "The Lingam is a source of pride to Perth Hindus. The granite was obtained locally, and we engaged a Perth craftsman to sculpt it."

The first function to be held on the temple site was Krishna Jayanthi in July 1986. Dr. Kulaendra recalls, "It didn't seem quite as propitious as some had hoped for. We put up a huge marquee. We had torrential rain, many cars became bogged, and we needed a Landrover to pull them from the mire." However, the next celebration, Navaratri, was more auspicious. "The weather smiled on us this time, much to our relief." The Temple Association put up two marquees, and about 400 people attended. A highlight was the consecration on site of the Devi murthi by Swami Shantanand.

The phase one of the master plan for the temple includes a hall for 300 people with an altar for Ganapati, Siva and Parvati, kitchen, and parking for 130 cars at a cost of \$143,000, of which all but \$18,000 has been paid off. "We were generally pleased with the result." Says Dr. Kulaendra. "It was within our means economically, though perhaps too much consideration was given to cost, and too little to overall aesthetics."

Asked whether there was any local opposition to the construction of a Hindu temple in the Western Australian capital, Dr. Kulaendra appeared surprised. "Local people, including politicians, and most of those of other faiths have been very supportive," he reports. "If there was any major opposition, we didn't hear about it."

The Hindu Temple Association of Western Australia is financially supported by 300 families. Besides a standard management committee, a group of trustees, senior members of the various Indian communities associated with the temple, assist with the management of temple lands and assets. "The system works quite well," says Dr. Kulaendra. "Trustees work on a 'time-to-spare, wisdom-to-share' basis, and ensure that each community's voice is heard." A chief trustee, appointed under a rotational system, sits on the management committee. The local Hindus performed the pujas themselves until they appointed a Sri Lankan temple pujari, Adchayamoorthy Muthukumaraswamy Kurukkal. The Kurukkal has since passed away.

Several decades ago Perth was the reputed berth for the lowest of Australian Anglo-Saxon attitudes: rejection of the unfamiliar, and the dismissive scorn reserved for "outsiders." It was once a home for a group of racist extremists known as the Australian National Movement.

But in the early years Swami Shantanand attributed special significance to the area and today the community climate is much changed and more open. Now the dedication and sacrifice of Hindus has succeeded in weaving their "immigrant religion" into the Australian spiritual fabric here. It is a city established on a prayag, "down under," where the confluence of the Swan and Canning River merge and open out into a large lake, before flowing into the vast southern seas of the Indian ocean. A "new frontier" spirit of Hindu cooperation, devotion and deep commitment has renewed spirituality in this ancient place regarded with reverence by the indigenous aborigines.

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