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Category : [October/November/December 2004](#)

Published by Anonymous on Oct. 01, 2004

WORSHIP

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One woman's devotion brings the blessings of the elephant-headed God to rural USA

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With three feet of freshly fallen snow on the ground and the morning sun shining brightly in a clear blue sky, it was a typical winter day in Vermont. The man who came that morning to take measurements in my home for a window drape spoke with a heavy Vermont accent. When I asked him to take his boots off before entering our pool building, he grunted: "Don't work without my boots." Wisps of water vapor bellowed from his barely open mouth, forming a frozen cloud in the cold air.

"Oh, you simply must, " I insisted. "The pool doesn't have any chlorine or chemicals in it, so we ask our guests to remove their shoes. And, see that over there?" I said, pointing in the direction of our Ganesha statue. "Whenever you see one of those, you should take your shoes off as a courtesy."

I guess my voice sounded a little more serious than I intended, or perhaps Ganesha caught the man's attention. With eyes darting back and forth between me and the statue, he finally bent over to remove his boots. As soon as I opened the door, he took two long strides and planted himself right in front of the statue. "What the heck is this elephant doing here?" he muttered. "Never seen an elephant dancing on one foot before. Got four arms. Strangest elephant I've ever seen!"

Clearly, this man needed a crash course on Ganesha. I mentioned a few things quickly to which he replied, "I'm going to look for Him on the web." He then took the measurement for the window drape and left.

In 1999 my husband, Ehud, decided to build a 26,000-gallon indoor swimming pool for us to use for exercise during the long Vermont winters, which can linger on for up to five months. Growing up in Tamil Nadu, I wasn't used to outdoor winter sports, and we were in the habit of exercising vigorously every day. It just made perfect sense to have an indoor pool.

During one of my frequent solitary walks through the forest around our house, I stopped and sat by a nearby pond to watch the gentle wind make tiny waves on the surface of the water. In my mind I caught a fleeting glimpse of Ganesha by a temple pond near my home in India. It was an inspiring moment, infusing me with a powerful burst of energy. Ganesha is often an integral part of the landscape near any body of water in Tamil Nadu. Suddenly, I was consumed with an idea: We could make a home for Ganesha by our swimming pool!

Mother's story

Years ago, my mother told me a Ganesha story illustrating why you never see a well in Tamil Nadu without a Ganesha shrine nearby, and why everyone who fetches water at a well always bows to Ganesha first.

"It has to do with a little argument Ganesha had with his mother, " she explained, locking her beautiful eyes with mine. "Ganesha was a handsome young bachelor who was soon to be married. 'I will only marry a woman as beautiful as you,' He told his mom. When Siva heard this, He admonished Ganesha. 'Forget it, son,' He said. 'The most beautiful woman ever created is my wife and your mother, Paravati.' Always the supremely compassionate mother, Paravati consoled Ganesha saying, 'Son, there is always hope. Keep searching and you might succeed in finding the lady of your dreams. Sit by temple ponds, wells, rivers, lakes and streams. There will be no shortage of beautiful girls who will come every day to fetch water.' Ganesha obeyed his mother and made it a habit to find a seat near every body of water he came across. And that's why you rarely see a well without a Ganesha nearby, " his mother concluded, adding: "There is always hope, you see, not only

that Ganesha might find a girl as beautiful as his mother, but also that all young ladies might find a husband as handsome as Ganesha."

Years later my mother asked me, "Do you remember that story of Ganesha and the wells that I told you some time ago? Do you think that is the only reason Ganesha sits near wells and ponds?" She wasn't trying to drive home a message. She wanted to know if I had learned the story's real lesson.

"Mother you must have been kidding about Ganesha looking for a wife, " I said. "None of the books I have ever read mention that story." "Many stories are not written down, " she explained. "This one is all about water. We must have a profound respect for water. Water gives life, and it can take life in the blink of an eye. The next time you take a bath, pause for a moment before entering the water. Bow to Lord Ganesha. Ask for His protection and His blessing. Then ask the water to be merciful and life giving before you finally step into it. No matter what you do, this humility and devotion will help."

This conversation came back to me as I considered the idea of installing a Ganesha statue near our swimming pool. I told my husband about it.

"Get in touch with Hinduism Today for advice, " he exclaimed. I was so happy that he was not only endorsing my idea but also offering a practical plan for obtaining a Ganesha statue from India.

My Hindu background and upbringing are a source of immense joy to Ehud. He has always encouraged me to write articles for Hinduism Today. Now he was thinking that the staff there might be able to help find a sculptor who could assist us in planting a seed from the "land of Bharat " in the frigid soil of Vermont.

Immediately, I dashed off an e-mail to Hawaii. The reply was immediate. It was recommended that I contact Mr. Nellaiappan, a gentleman who had worked with the monastery in Hawaii to export religious icons from India and knew qualified sculptors who could do fine work. During our next visit to India, we met Mr. Nellaiappan and his main sculptor, Sri Venkatesh. We all agreed upon a picture of

Ganesha that could be used as a model for carving our Ganesha statue.

Seven months later, in July of 2000, we got a call from the warehouse where my husband's publishing company ships and receives books. "There is a 1,000-pound crate here, addressed to the attention of Ehud Sperling, " said the voice on the other end of the line. "And I can tell you, it is not books." The huge parcel had traveled by land, sea and by air from Chennai [Madras] through Mumbai [Bombay], Singapore, California, Boston, and finally on to Rutland here in Vermont.

That crate was very heavy and could not be budged. My husband and I had no clue what to do. One of Ehud's staff casually mentioned, "Why not call the people who carve monuments for cemeteries? They must know how to move large stones." Good idea! Actually, Vermont is famous for granite quarrying and stone carving, so we contacted one of the stone companies. Sure enough, that crate was soon being hauled up our driveway on the back of a truck equipped with a crane and three burly men. With that crane plus a collection of ramps, dollies, and pulleys, these fellows waltzed into our pool building like dainty ballerinas, balancing the crate with ease.

The elegant, finely chiseled, three-foot-high dancing Ganesha of gray-black granite that emerged from the crate was an enchanting beauty to behold. The soul of the sculptor shining through the stone was hard to ignore. One of the three men had worked in Italy in a marble-sculptor's workshop. He knew what it meant to carve a statue with such fine proportion and detail. He could not take his eyes off it, and complimented its craftsmanship again and again.

Immediately after Ganesha's arrival, all of the appropriate ceremonies were performed to make Him comfortable in His new home. To begin with, the pratisthapana puja (installation ceremony) was done by--oh dear--me! For prasadam (sacred offering) I most gladly prepared Ganesha's favorite sweet, koikattai--traditional candy balls made of rice, jaggery and coconut. Although I had never actually prepared this dish before myself, I had watched my mother make it many times back in Tamil Nadu. To my happy surprise, it turned out great. I was quite impressed with myself, to tell the truth, and thought: "Well, I have passed the test of being a good Tamil girl."

While my two-year-old Mahar squirmed in my lap to get my attention, I finished the puja by chanting Ganesha's 1008 names. For arati (showing burning camphor to the Deity to conclude the ceremony), Mahar rang the bell. As the flames bellowed smoke and the camphor burned, I pleaded with Ganesha, "Please pardon me for any transgression I have made in trying to discharge my cultural and religious obligations here in Vermont where no one knows You."

Pilgrims begin to come

Soon Ganesha got busy on His own, pulling strings here and there to make sure people would come to visit Him. The first to come was Sri Ramaswami from Chennai. He is a renowned and highly acclaimed Sanskrit scholar with a golden voice and impeccable Sanskrit pronunciation. He is also a student of the hatha yoga master, Sri T. Krishnamachari, and an author of several books on yoga. He had come to visit my husband's publishing office and was invited by Ehad to our home. During his visit, he sat in front of the Ganesha statue and performed a most eloquent puja. It was so beautiful. Honestly, if you could see this scene: the priest, the statue, the lamps and the people sitting by devotedly. You would think you were in the heart of India.

A couple of weeks later, a friend of ours named Lynn called to arrange to visit us. "Would it be a problem if I brought my teacher with me?" She asked. "Bring your teacher anytime, " I answered. This teacher turned out to be a sannyasini (a female renunciate monk) named Shubhra from the lineage of Swami Chinmayananda. What a coincidence! As a child I had attended classes conducted by the Chinnaya Mission. During those years, I met Swami Chinmayananda and heard him speak and chant often.

Shubhra teaches Vedanta throughout the United States. When she learned of my childhood association with Swamiji, she embraced me warmly. She was ecstatic when she saw Ganesha, and during the evening puja, spontaneously chanted bhajanas (devotional songs) for several hours. After the puja was over, we all soaked in peace, happiness and tranquility that filled the air.

"We need to offer our Ganesha a royal treat, " said Shubhra after some time. "I will speak with Kailashan." She said this quietly, almost as if she was just talking to

herself. I soon learned that Kailashan was a high-powered priest from Tamil Nadu, trained since childhood in Hindu temple ceremony. He now lives in New Jersey, about a seven-hour drive from our home here in Vermont.

Shubhra arranged for Kailashan to come with his wife and their children to do a Ganesha homa (fire ceremony) in August of 2000. Every summer since then, he has visited us to do a special puja for Ganesha. At that time, my sister who lives in Oman, comes with her two sons. Shubhra, Lynn and their friends come from New York. Shyamdas and his wife, Tulsi, also come from New York. Many of our neighbors and friends from Vermont also attend. It has become quite a big event.

Another friend of ours named Leslie always makes sure that the event is fully supplied with flowers, a very important commodity at any Hindu affair. All of our friends help with all aspects of the occasion including decorating, dressing Ganesha, hosting guests and cleaning up afterward. Many of the guests have never been to a Hindu religious ceremony, yet feel quite at home here. Amidst all the devotional fervor and festivities, my sister and I cook up a saatwik (simple and pure) vegetarian meal and prasadam.

In the evening, my husband's book-publishing company, Inner Traditions International, sponsors a talk by Shubhra as a service to the community, which facilitates the sharing of Indian philosophy and wisdom with local Vermonters. The local church gives free use of its space.

This talk is quite an event. We go up to the altar of this church where there is a Jesus on the cross in a town where the population is almost entirely white. We bring flowers, incense, lamp and a picture of Swami Chinmayananda (Shubhra's teacher). The hall fills up with people, and the whole affair is a tremendous success. Shubhra talks about relationships, letting go of anger, forgiving and being free--all in relationship to Hinduism. This is what I call religious integration and tolerance in small-town America.

Our little town of Rochester in Vermont has only 900 people. Having scanned the local public archives, I know that I am the only Hindu who has ever lived in this 36-square-mile town. Although there are a few other Hindu families in Vermont, there are no Hindu temples. We perform daily puja to our beloved Ganesha, but it is

this annual Ganesha homa that truly transforms our humble pool-side shrine into Vermont's one and only Hindu temple. I am always amazed and dazzled when His shrine takes on all its powerful grandeur. For days afterwards I hear how the joyful experience has changed the lives not only of those who attended but also those who just heard of the ceremony.

Both my husband and I believe that a lasting happiness, health and security can only exist for an individual when humanity as a whole lives with some sense of unity. That this dream might come true is our prayer to the elephant-headed remover of obstacles. It is a prayer that a God of His power and love must consider worthy of an answer.

Meanwhile, Vermont's first Ganesha lives happily here with us in Rochester through our cold, gray winters. All year round He receives visitors, and each day as we prepare to take our daily dip in our pool--which has now become His temple tank--we reflect on His grace and the vast hope it brings into our lives.