

[Enshrining Saints & Sages](#)

Category : [October/November/December 2005](#)

Published by Anonymous on Oct. 02, 2005

TEMPLES

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Suhir leaves a legacy of respect well earned

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Not long ago, I received the blessings of a truly good man. His name was Sudhir Vaidhyan. Everyone who knew him loved him dearly. He brought good health and well being to a lot of people before he died in February of 2003. And he did it all his own way. Clearly, he deserved all the praise that was heaped upon him. But there was one feature of his distinctive 70 years on Earth that is worthy of special note. As one of his close friends put it: "Oh yes--Sudhir Vaidhyan! He was a very great man--doubly great. He lived two lives in one."

When Sudhir was a young man, he was told by astrologers that he would die at the age of 57. He was happy with this prediction and contentedly prepared for his transition in a most admirable and dignified manner. However, when that fated time finally rolled around, he was impressively healthy--no where near death. "What is this?" he asked himself. "Was the astrological prophecy incorrect? Surely not! There must be some other reason for this extension of my life."

Being religious, Sudhir assumed this gift of a "second life " was for some purpose related to service or devotion. Although he had always helped the less fortunate, and certainly felt a strong inclination to do more of the same now, his secret spiritual aspiration had always been to build temples dedicated to the worship of holy men and women. He asked in prayer, "Am I finally being given an opportunity to build my temples?" The Gods must have answered "Yes, " because that is exactly what he did.

Sudhir figured his "second life " began in 1990. When I talked to him just three weeks before he passed away in 2003, he briefly explained what he had been doing for the past 12 years. "We formed a charitable trust and bought some marshy land, " he said. "On that land we built a temple for Agashthya Muni (a famous Tamil Saiva saint who lived in South India approximately 5,000 years ago). Since then, 11 other temples for holy men and women have come up. The construction of these temples has continued without interruption. The money was always there."

Sudhir's temples are located at Agasthyasramam at Agasthya Nagar in the village of Kureekad in the Ernakulam district of the South Indian state of Kerala. They are considered unique because 12 out of 13 of their images of worship are people rather than Gods. Although this is unusual, even in India, these deified souls are treated like Gods for good reason. Each of them provided invaluable scientific and spiritual contributions in the fields of Vedic medicine, astrology, service and spirituality.

As one might expect, the rituals performed in these temples are also appropriately distinctive. Because many of the men and women worshiped were healers, the murtis (icons) in the sanctums are anointed with the juice of medicinal plants instead of milk and ghee. The garlands used for decoration are made of grasses, seeds and leaves from medicinal plants, rather than flowers. The prasadam given out after the temple pujas (worship ceremonies) by the well-trained, non-brahmin priests consists of healthful herbs instead of sugary sweets.

As a devotee enters the temple complex through its main entrance to the south, he comes upon Lord Siva in the form of Dakshinamurti enshrined to the North. In two facing rows to the East and West, twelve shrines--six on either side--house the images of famous Vedic healers, saints and sages, including Markandeyan, Jnana Murugan, Lopamudra Devi, Oushada Ganapathy, Bharadwaja Maharishi, Athri Maharishi, Anasuya Devi, Saubhagya Mahalakshmi, Bhrigu Maharishi, Arundhati Devi, Vasishtha Maharishi and Narada Maharishi.

The shrine for Agasthya Muni was the first to be built. Thus the entire complex of 13 small temples was named Agasthyasramam in his honor. The design of this unique temple construction represents a famous Vedic scene called "Naimisharanyam " in which wise men sit together in spiritual conclave for the benefit of all mankind.

When I met Sudhir, his presence was humble yet overpowering. Slim, quiet and unassuming, he hardly looked the part he played in the lives of the many people he influenced. Long before he was scheduled to leave his physical body, his reputation as a practitioner of siddha and ayurveda medicine had extended far beyond his home state of Kerala. His methods were more mystical than orthodox. One retired, senior police officer told me he watched Sudhir diagnose a patient by simply running his palm over the affected region of the patient's body.

It seemed that everything about this man was intriguingly unique, if not special. In the ancient land of Kerala, famous for its temples dedicated to Siva, Sakti, Vishnu and Ayyappan, Sudhir worshiped Agasthya Muni, the father of siddha medicine. Although he personally lived an ascetic's life in a small thatched hut, he built two fully equipped hospitals, a number of medicinal gardens, several clinics, an old age home, an orphanage for the physically handicapped, a modern research center for the study of Vedic medicines and a library for ancient texts on ancient medicine.

Today, all of the projects that Sudhir set in motion are coming to life according to his vision.

"We feel his presence here, " said Dr. Yogi Das, Sudhir's first disciple. "We are confident that all he conceived will manifest. Those who had received treatment from Sudhir Vaidhyan (vaidhyan is a title for a healer) regularly visit this temple complex because they believe that their cure was made possible through the blessings of Agasthya Muni and the other "deities " here. Many cases deemed incurable by modern medicine were treated and ameliorated by Sudhir Vaidhyan, " Dr. Yogi Das told Hinduism Today, "The growth of the ashram here and the temple complex is a standing testimony to his greatness."

Many of the people that Sudhir treated were of national repute. These wealthy and influential souls, including ministers, politicians, judges and religious leaders, donated to Sudhir's projects through the years.

When asked by a journalist in the early 1990s why he felt so impelled to build temples to great spiritual men and women, Sudhir replied, "All the sciences, including siddha and ayurveda medicine, have come to us from our great Vedic teachers, but we have not built any temples for them. The present and future

generation needs a place where they can seek the blessings of these great souls, or at least have some notion of what they did." Certainly, Sudhir Vaidhyan lives on as one more of Agasthyasramam's illustrious inner-plane assembly of the wise and benevolent.