SEEKING THE LORD OF SEVEN HILLS
Category : January/February/March 2006
Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 2006

FEATURE

SEEKING THE LORD OF SEVEN HILLS

Join us on pilgrimage to India's grand Vishnu temple famous for its extraordinary wealth and undying service to the poor

Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

Although the VIP's were perched on an elevated entryway 20 feet above the ground, they were still locked into a crowd that seemed to have a mind of its own as it inched forward like creeping lava toward the main sanctum of the temple. This throng of pilgrims had been tightly packed together for hours, waiting to catch just a glimpse of their beloved Lord Balaji. Although the heat was almost unbearable, many of these devotees were chanting, "Govinda, Govinda, " with frenzied intensity. Suddenly, a young boy appeared near the VIPs. No one could see where he had came from. He was disabled and deformed. An old lady was with him, perhaps his grandmother. As the chanting escalated to a crescendo, the lady and boy turned toward the other pilgrims and raised their folded hands in the prayerful gesture. As if on cue, the pilgrims showered hundreds of coins and currency notes upon their heads. A few minutes later, more disabled children appeared--seemingly out of no where. They, too, were blessed in the same fashion.

Welcome to the Venkateshwara temple of Tirumala in Andhra Pradesh. Many ardent Hindus live by the conviction that the mere sight of this temple's central icon of Lord Balaji assures spiritual transformation. Having now had the experience of seeing this deity myself, I can honestly say that I understand this sentiment completely and most certainly hope that it is true. According to legend, the Balaji image in this most holy place is svayambhu, which means it was not installed by man, but miraculously manifested by God Himself.

Constructed in the ninth century and lavishly extolled in ancient Hindu religious literature, the temple is nestled 125 miles inland from Chennai, deep in the postcard beauty of South India's Seshachalam mountains. It is certainly not surprising that such a special place would attract more than twenty million pilgrims a year. Balaji is a form of Lord Vishnu who is also frequently referred to--even in this temple--as Venkateshwara, Govinda, Srinivasa and Narayana.

Tirumala is inseparably linked to a much larger town nearby named Tirupati. A half-million permanent residents reside in Tirupati, as compared with about 10,000 living in Tirumala. Because pilgrims traveling to Tirumala from Chennai must pass through Tirupati, it has become an important pilgrim destination in its own right. Tirupati is also home to the headquarters of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD), a mammoth organization that employs over twelve thousand people and oversees the business and management of not only the Balaji temple in Tirumala but eleven other temples in the surrounding area.

One of the world's richest religious institutions, the TTD maintains a high-powered temple trust board that is presided over by an Executive Officer, and, under him, two Joint Executive Officers--one for Tirumala and the other for Tirupati. These three head up a fleet of deputies and assistants who attend to the institution's various concerns, including temple management, sculptural construction, cultural activities and a multitude of responsibilities associated with managing a large number of hospitals and schools. The TTD ensures that at least 50 percent of Tirumala's energy needs are self-generated--mostly from state-of-the-art windmills and solar paneling.

Coping with thousands of pilgrims seven days a week, 365 days a year, is a huge challenge for the TTD Public Relations Department. It was this group of expert people-handlers that we got to know well when we--photographer Thomas Kelly and I--visited Tirupati and Tirumala in the intense heat of early June on assignment from Hinduism Today. Truth be told, I was under Balaji's magic spell the instant I was asked to do this story.

As we walked the dusty roads of Tirupati on our way to Tirumala, a sea of shaven heads stretched out in every direction. Everyone was on the move, coming from or going to the famous seven hills of Balaji's abode. While Tirupati is permeated with well-advertised liquor and meat shops, and the city's hotels feature bars and non-vegetarian restaurants, pilgrims passing through this town on their way to

Tirumala will not purchase meat and alcohol during festival celebrations. Such items (including cigarettes) are prohibited by local law during these special times. Police actually perform luggage checks at designated points between Tirupati and Tirumala to confiscate banned items.

Our Work Becomes Worship

Thomas and I had no idea what to expect when we first arrived in Tirumala. Although formal arrangements for our visit had been made far in advance through our Hinduism Today headquarters in Hawaii, our first impression of the temple was so overwhelming that we were immediately lost in a blissfully divine amnesia of sorts. Fortunately for us, a friendly man named T. Ravi was conveniently on hand to rescue us. After briefly introducing himself as a representative of the TTD Public Relations Department, he invited us to attend a puja (worship ceremony) that was just about to begin in the main sanctum of the temple.

Following the temple's strict protocol, we left our shoes, cell phones, tape recorders and cameras in the safe care of our hosts before proceeding to the ancient Pushkarni Lake near the temple. At the lake, as we purified ourselves before receiving the darshan (sight) of Lord Balaji, it suddenly became apparent to me that we could not possibly do an appropriate story on a spiritual place like this without immersing ourselves in worship as true pilgrims. In all of its majestic elegance, the real charm of this magic abode of Balaji is obviously its ethereal bhava (devotional spirit), more than its legendary fame, food and fortune.

Although this temple is commonly regarded as one of the most glamorous and charismatic pilgrimage destinations in the world, it is also extolled and sometimes criticized for its fabulous wealth. Yet, as I stand here in this glorious place, I am not mystified that the fifty thousand pilgrims who visit Tirumala each day during religious festivals feel so uplifted and fulfilled that they don't mind spending or giving any amount of money. The source of their inspiration is obvious. This is a powerful place. Its affluence is not nearly as much the result of the entrepreneurial expertise of local businessmen as it is the spiritual passion experienced by its deeply inspired pilgrim guests.

Pushkarni Lake is surrounded on all sides by concrete steps and shrines. As we

arrived, a large number of devotees were taking dainty dips as they quietly chanted the names of Lord Vishnu. Because the lake is considered as sacred as the temple, pilgrims are discouraged from taking full baths, washing clothes or using soap in any way. To compensate for this restriction, elaborate bathing facilities are provided nearby.

Thomas and I encountered interesting devotees at every turn. Just talking to these exhilarated people turned out to be an adventure in itself. As different as they all were, they all had one thing in common: They loved Lord Balaji.

"I have been coming here for the darshan of Lord Balaji since childhood, " said Rama Chandra Murthy, a 38-year-old software consultant from Hyderabad. "At least once a year, our whole family comes together. We are all devoted to Lord Balaji. He is like our father. He watches over us. When I pray to him, I do not ask for anything in particular. Things just happen automatically."

The Journey Begins

After our ritual dip in the Pushkarni Lake, Ravi and other TTD representives helped us move gracefully into the outer portion of the mammoth temple compound. We were elated that our first sight of the Lord would be a VIP darshan. It was a grand honor indeed.

We began our lengthy journey to the main sanctum through a complex maze of long, dark corridors. After hurrying along, ducking and dodging through these tunnels for about 15 minutes, we suddenly found ourselves immersed in a thick crowd of devotees--more VIPs as it turned out. Immediately, we were stopped by a security official who asked Thomas to sign a declaration form stating that he has faith in the Hindu Gods. Even as he was quickly scribbling his signature, we were being rushed forward down yet another dark passageway. It was not like we had any control over how we moved. We were being impelled by the rolling power of the crowd.

The further we walked, the more crowded it became. Soon, we were all so tightly

packed together that just breathing was difficult. What little air there was hung heavily around us like wet heat. Just when I thought I could not bear such restrictive austerity any longer, we emerged up and out of our cavernous environment onto a small overpass.

Through the cage-like fencing that bordered both sides of this bridge, we were able to inhale some fresh air and observe a large portion of the inner temple complex from an elevation of about 20 feet above the other pilgrims. It was like being in the crow's nest of a battleship. Everyone was chanting, "Govinda, Govinda." Somehow, in the confusion of it all, there was a spiritual feeling of peace and contentment.

The pilgrims varied in age. The young were tending to the old. Weary mothers were carrying their smallest children while leading others by the hand. There were no tourists, so Thomas was attracting a lot of attention.

I casually asked a man next to me how he was holding up in the discomfort of our waiting. He surprised me with a beaming grin as he said, "This morning I was walking up the footpath to the temple. It was a most arduous journey. When I reached the outer compound of the temple, I thought to myself that I would never do this again. Now, all of my fatigue is gone and I feel completely refreshed. In fact, I plan to perform anga pradakshana (praying while rolling the physical body) around the main sanctum."

After crossing the bridge we were back down on the ground level and being forced into two narrow lanes, each about three feet wide. We were with the VIPs in one lane. Everyone else was in the other lane, moving at a slower rate.

To our left there was a concrete wall--to our right, more iron fencing. About a dozen industrious food and beverage hawkers were busy trying to sell us water, cold drinks and eatables. The cold drinks were quite popular because of the heat.

For about an hour we continued moving slowly, covering a distance of perhaps half a mile. Finally, we reached the front gates of the innermost temple. Right beyond the entrance, water for feet washing was flowing from one side of the giant doorway

to the other. "This is such an imaginative idea, " I thought to myself, "making feet washing so unavoidable. Very ingenious." To my knowledge, no other temple in India has a feature like this.

Approaching the Lord

Once inside the inner temple, it was like were transported back to some ancient time. A towering hallway, framed with elaborately carved pillars, stretched far to our left and right. This corridor and others like it connect grand, spacious halls filled with golden icons of Gods, Goddesses and their vahanas (animal mounts). Awestruck and amazed, I wondered to myself how I could ever possibly write about all of this. Thomas, of course, was deeply regretting that he had not been allowed to bring his camera. All we could do right now was try to take it all in, one little piece at a time.

Here and there, we spotted fleets of robed priests moving this way and that, attending to duties and preparing to perform puja (ceremony). Eventually, two of these pujaris invited Thomas and me into a large hall to take a closer look at the priceless works of art inside. There I took the opportunity to talk with a bright young man who had joined us on our spontaneous detour.

I asked him what inspired him to come to Tirumala. "Well, my own thinking is that the Lord helps those who help themselves, " he replied. "I try to work hard on my own first. Then I pray. Right now I am doing well as a student and hope to be a successful businessman. I know I have tried my best in school. So I feel it is okay to ask Lord Balaji for His grace."

Soon enough, the three of us were again mingling with the others in the queue. All of this time, the crowd had been moving slowly forward like an unstoppable elephant. I could not help pondering how long this might have taken had we not been given the "VIP shortcut."

The area around the main sanctum was scintillating with an energy that felt electric. Many devotees in our group were still chanting, "Govinda, Govinda." Devotees

coming out of the main sanctum, having received their darshan, were enthusiastically joining our chanting. It was a joyous moment of jubilation. The lines of devotees, coming and going from Lord Balaji's abode, were now only a few feet apart.

Nearby, some young ladies were offering prayers and prostrating to Goddesses at side shrines. I overheard a woman right behind me whisper to her relative that they were praying for happiness in married life.

As the main sanctum finally became visible, the excitement of the pilgrims escalated. They began to chant louder and faster, "Govinda Govinda." Finally, their worship reached a frenzied culmination. The people behind me were shoving more forcefully, and we were moving more quickly. A slight sense of panic fluttered through the crowd. "I wonder if these darshan sessions ever get out of control, " I thought. Suddenly, my musing was cut short. Just as we passed through the last door, He appeared. There He was--Lord Balaji, in all of His magnificent splendor. What an unforgettable moment!

The pitch-black granite murti of the Deity was mesmerizing. Although the delicately carved detail of the image was exquisitely ornate, most of this intricacy was lost beneath the flower garlands that had been stacked high upon His head and shoulders. He seemed so colossally massive and vitally alive. How could it be that He was only seven feet tall?

I stood before the Lord for only about three minutes. Not long. Yet it was a three minutes I will never forget. He touched my heart and soul. I was overwhelmed. Although this experience was intensely personal, and for that reason, not something I feel inclined to describe, I will say that it introduced me to a unique feeling that, since then, I have frequently referred back to for strength, stability and inspiration.

Directly following our darshan, both Thomas and I were completely oblivious to our surroundings. As much as we wanted to stay right there in the sanctum, the same force that had pushed us in was now shoving us out. Before we knew it, we were outside. As is often true in life, we had been at the mercy of a force larger than ourselves. One thing is for sure. As far as the Lord of this temple is concerned, each and every devotee is a VIP.

After leaving the sanctum, we found a peaceful spot near the outer perimeter of the temple compound to sit for a few minutes and attempt to recapture the glory of what had just happened. Yes, the resplendent Lord Balaji was still right there, indelibly etched in my mind, just as I had seen Him. The more I tried to recall His darshan, the more blissful I felt. Such was the power of this mahadeva (great shining being) who had just changed my life.

There was a policeman standing near us. Because he seemed far more blissfully content than any "peacekeeper " I had ever seen, I introduced myself and asked him what it was like working in this holy place. "I am very happy with this assignment, " he said. "My whole family worships Lord Balaji. They all think that it is a great honor that I have this job. I hope to work here for many years to come. My only ambition is to help the pilgrims in all possible ways."

Making Heart-Felt Offerings

As soon as we felt the urge to move on, we joined another group of devotees slowly moving toward the hundi (temple offering box). This temple receives so much money that its daily total often makes headlines in newspapers all across India. Many entrepreneurs treat Lord Balaji as their business partner, never forgetting to give Him His share of their profits.

According to an interesting story still told by grandmas throughout South India, the temple's affluence comes from a debt accrued by Lord Balaji Himself. Long ago, it seems, the Lord needed a large sum of money to marry a pretty Goddess named Padmavati. Although he had no trouble borrowing said funds from Kubera, the God of Wealth, the amount was apparently so staggeringly massive that it has still not been fully repaid, even to this day. Hence, some faithful devotees make their temple offerings with the thought that their contributions are helping to clear this Divine debt.

Although it is traditional for a Hindu temple to have a hundi, few have one like Tirumala's. Lord Balaji's hundi is a large copper bowl, open at the top and covered from opposite sides with two pieces of white canvas that do not overlap in the middle. This gap left between the two pieces of canvas provides a rather large opening for devotees to drop in offerings of various shapes and sizes.

As we awaited our turn to give, we observed that each and every devotee had something valuable to offer. With folded hands and closed eyes, they would make their donations with compelling reverence. I was particularly moved when I saw a wealthy lady remove all the valuables she was wearing, wrap them in a yellow cloth and drop them into the hundi.

Scores of TTD employees work in shifts just to count the money and valuables received by the Lord of Seven Hills. These offerings include hair, bangles, jewelry, currency, necklaces, earrings, gold, silver, sugar candy, religious icons, wrist watches, promissory notes, lottery tickets, coins of all denominations and more.

The hundi's contents are emptied twice a day in the presence of officials and devotees. All money received is credited in the Lord's account in several banks. The valuables are sent to the TTD Treasury in Tirupati. Much of the temple's donated wealth is invested in charity projects. A portion of it is also spent on the upkeep of the temple, as well as the preparation of sacred food offerings, which are given to devotees free of charge.

Thomas and I made our humble offerings. I also gave donations on behalf of my friends and relatives in New Delhi.

Balaji's Famous Sweets

Just as we were leaving the temple, we received some small laddus (sweets made of wheat, fruit and nuts) as prashadam (blessed food offering). Although these mouth-watering morsels were delicious, they were only a hint of something we had both long awaited. It was now time to try out Tirupati's famous super-size laddus. Needless to say, we were itching with anticipation to get our hands on these giant sweets made only here at Lord Balaji's holy feet.

We were entitled to two of these jumbo sweets apiece due to the fact that we had each purchased a hundred-rupee ticket (about two dollars) to enter the temple just hours before.

We had to do a little bit of investigative scouting to actually collect our just desserts. Eventually we spied a conspicuous gathering of folks like us, quite busily involved with something relating to food. Were they making a purchase? These laddus were supposed to be free--or at least already paid for. We were told by some vendors standing nearby that these pilgrims were being sold "covers " for laddus. These covers were small plastic bags designed to be used for holding the scrumptiously sticky sweets. A very good idea as it turned out.

After purchasing our bags, we proceeded to the laddu distribution counters, which we followed a hungry crowd to find, just around the corner. Hundreds of people were forming yet more queues to receive their two-pound sweet balls from about 12 stands. This time we did not wait long. After just a few short minutes, Thomas and I were walking away, happily devouring our blessed treats.

Sixty million laddus are produced in Tirumala every year--just for the Balaji temple. Mammoth ghee-pumping stations and conveyer belts have been constructed for this massive production of Divine sweets.

We had arrived at the temple around three in the afternoon. Now it was six in the evening. Our VIP journey for darshan had taken a little over three hours.

Head-Shaving at Tirumala

The Venkateshwara temple of Tirumala is almost as internationally famous for its head shaving as it is for its wealth--and its laddus. Every day some 25,000 men, women and children have their locks snipped by temple barbers.

By having their heads shaved in a temple like this, pilgrims strive to bring forward their soulful qualities of humility and purity, demonstrating to God and themselves that they can surrender their lower nature at His holy feet. It is also traditional for very young children to get their heads shaved for the first time in a temple ceremony called the chudakarana samskara. Often, on an auspicious occasions like this, entire families will have their heads shaved.

Looking out over the streets and paths of Tirupati and Tirumala, we saw literally hundreds of people of all ages with newly shaven heads. This is a rare sight--even in India. It was quite an experience to witness perhaps six hundred sadhus having their heads shaved before walking to Ujjain along the holy Shipra River for their initiation into renunciate life.

According to one legend, Lord Vishnu took up residence in an anthill near the place now known as Tirumala, for the purpose of performing yogic penance. When His friend, Lord Brahma, observed this noble undertaking, He took the form of a cow and went to Lord Vishnu every day so that Vishnu could be sustained by holy milk while performing His austerities.

The owner of the cow, who did not fully understand this mystical situation and was frustrated that his cow kept wandering off to feed an ascetic, tried to cut the animal with a knife. Because the cow was actually Brahma, the Lord received a wound in the head, resulting in a loss of some hair. When a nearby devotee named Neeladri witnessed this, she quickly rushed forward to offer her own hair to replace what the Lord had just lost. Thus was born the tradition of offering hair to Lord Balaji at Tirumala.

A Visit to the Kalyanakatta Complex

We visited the Kalyanakatta Complex where over twenty-thousand pilgrims have their heads shaved everyday. There we saw hundreds of men, women and children in dozens of queues patiently waiting for their turn with the temple barbers. Although it was an extremely hot afternoon, no one seemed to mind. The barbers, busily taking care of so many patrons, could have easily been going about their work in a frazzled or hectic manner, but they were not. They were cool and calm, even devotional, as they worked. A head shaving here is referred to as a "hair-offering ceremony."

Crossing through queues of waiting pilgrims and stepping over loose piles of hair, we made our way to a place from which we could closely scrutinize the barbers at work. Although we tried to speak with these fast-moving artisans, communication of any sort was difficult at best. That was fine with us. It was enjoyable just to watch them work. They were quick, efficient and superbly skilled.

It was difficult to walk or even move through the rooms of this head-shaving complex. Not only were there a lot of people, but the floor--because of the tangled masses of wet hair--was sticky and slippery. It was easy to see why we were not allowed to take pictures. To someone looking in from the outside, this place might have easily seemed unphotogenic at best.

Barbers chanted "Govinda Govinda " as they began shaving. When they finished, they clasped their hands together, palm to palm, and again intoned "Govinda Govinda." Armed with only a straight razor, they could adeptly shave even a squirming child in five minutes or less. Women often choose to have a "symbolic " haircut during which only three locks of hair are removed.

After touring the rooms and halls of the entire complex, we met Mr. M.K. Venkateswara Varma, Deputy Executive Officer, TTD. He was in charge of the Kalyanakatta Complex and had agreed to grant us an exclusive interview.

Mr. Varma explained that hair sales bring in about six million US dollars a year. He also clarified that, although the Kalyankatta Complex is not the only place in Tirumala where head-shaving occurs, it was the only one where it is free.

When a colleague of mine in New Delhi came to know that I was in Tirupati, she called me on the telephone to ask if I might purchase some long hair for her while I was there. Thinking this would be an easy thing to accomplish, I promised her that I would. However, when I checked around to see if any of the hair offered at the temple was available for sale, I could not find anything, anywhere. Finally, a beauty parlor owner in Tirupati explained to me that hair offered to the Lord is not available for sale in the local market. This was later verified by a senior TTD official who said that all hair offered by pilgrims is for export only. I must confess that I was a bit disappointed to hear this, as I had also made plans to buy some of this hair for my wife as a present from my pilgrimage.

A Testimony

Friday, June 3, 2005, will always be a special day in my life. That was the day I got

my head shaved. Late at night--almost midnight, as a matter of fact--I had this ceremony performed in my room at the TTD Guest House in Tirumala. Arrangements had been made with the kind assistance of our guest house manager. The late hour was due to the fact that all the barbers were so busy. My head took seven minutes to shave. I timed it.

Though short and sweet, this experience had a tremendous effect on me. My whole personality completely transformed during that seemingly simple event. I felt differently afterward--as if I had attained some sort of enlightenment. After all, I had just offered my personal ego in the form of my hair at the feet of Lord Balaji.

I have had my head shaved only once before this. There were no pictures of that event, which took place in Rishikesh when I was only a year old. Had my parents not told me about this ceremony, I would not have known about it at all.

What I realized now that I certainly didn't realize then was how much one's personality is tied up in the hair, so to speak. One might rightly expect quite a significant psychological reaction from the experience of having the head shaved. Mine was not only positive, it was inspirational.

One of the nice things about participating in a ceremony like this in Tirumala is that--while you are there--you are among a lot of people who have just had the same experience. You can move around comfortably from place to place among literally thousands of others who look just like you. Interestingly enough, I felt more "normal " with a shaven head than without. Toward the end of my stay at Tirumala, I began planning for the task of explaining my appearance to friends and co-workers back home in Delhi.

It is worthy of note that in North India, a person often gets his or her head shaved when the mother or father expires. I certainly didn't want people assuming that had just happened in my life. So I did worry about this a bit. When I actually did get back to Delhi, however, I found that my concern was unwarranted. As soon as I mentioned the word, "Tirupati, " no further explanation for my appearance was necessary. Everyone tacitly understood.

Feeding Thousands

In the heart of Tirumala, right next door to the Venkateshwara Temple, as many as 60,000 pilgrims a day take their meals at a place known as the Annadanam Complex--all for free. The TTD has been providing this service since 1985.

Today, every pilgrim who goes for darshan in the Venkateshwara Temple is handed a small slip of paper while leaving. This "ticket " entitles the person to one free meal at the complex.

When we visited this busy place to sample the cuisine, it was packed. Not only was the food tasty, it was surprisingly varied--especially for such a mass feeding. Each pilgrim was given a nutritious meal consisting of five items, including a sweet dish--and all were allowed to eat as much as they wanted.

As we entered the restaurant, we observed a large fleet of TTD employees and social workers moving gracefully like seasoned dancers as they quickly and efficiently served the hungry pilgrims. After one group of several hundred devotees finished eating, the whole place was cleaned, reset and served for the next group--all in a matter of just a few minutes. This dynamic squadron of servants work tirelessly in unbroken continuity from nine in the morning until midnight--every day.

This Annadanam Complex is run by the Annadanam Trust, which has fixed deposits in various banks worth US $20 million. This trust also receives financial support from wealthy devotees who donate an average of about two million dollars a year. The interest from these savings is spent on the maintenance of the Annadanam Complex.

Training Priests

We had the good fortune of visiting the Sri Venkateshwara Veda Pathashala, a priest training school located only a few miles from Tirumala at a place called

Dharmagiri Hill. Our drive to the gurukulam (school) was breathtaking in its scenic beauty. A seven-foot-tall carving of Lord Brahma guards the entrance to this school, which is perched on 50 acres of glorious mountainous terrain covered with dense forests.

The pathashala is 221 years old. Within its precincts, thousands of priests and Sanskrit scholars have been trained through the years. Almost all of the Venkateshwara temple priests learned their craft here. Although the school was originally founded to train only priests for Tirumala, it eventually broadened its scope. Today, it boasts of alumni who perform in prestigious temples all around the world.

When the pathashala was established, it had three branches and only a handful of students. Now, there are more than 400 students studying in 14 branches. The full priest-training curriculum requires 12 years of study and is called the Vedadhyanam Course. Children begin this training at the age of eight. Three other shorter courses are offered at the pathashala. Each of these takes eight years to complete. Children receiving these courses begin their study at the age of 12. Although all of these systems prepare students for the performance of all the elaborate temple rituals, the Vedadhyanam Course provides more extensive training in chanting the Vedas. All of the teaching and living facilities at the pathashala are of the highest quality and free of charge. This includes meals, accommodation, clothes, books and medical services.

Although I have been fortunate enough to observe many impressive gurukulams throughout India, this pathashala is by far the finest I have ever seen. The classroom cottages are scattered about in picturesque locations throughout the vast land owned by the institution. The design of the buildings is ancient in concept, yet exhibits the highest standards of modern architecture. Drinking all of this in for the first time, I thought, "Here, the best of the East meets the best of the West."

All of the teachers at the pathashala were more than cooperative in taking time out of their busy schedules to host us graciously. They even organized a performance in their central hall (see photo) so that we could hear the students collectively chanting Vedic mantras in a most beautiful manner. After the chanting, they invited Thomas and me to address the assembly.

Later, as we casually perused the facilities, we learned from the principal that great efforts were being made to obtain recognition from the University Grants Commission for the courses offered at the pathashala. The principal explained that this acknowledgment would further enhance the reputation of the institution, as well as place higher value on degrees obtained at the pathashala. Such esteem, he said, could lead to better job placement opportunities for students after graduation and open up new opportunities for higher education if a student should choose to continue his studies.

Serving Pilgrims

All through our journey, Ravi had been of tremendous assistance to us. As Assistant Public Relations Officer at TTD, he had personally arranged many of our appointments and interviews with the institution's various departmental heads. He even stayed with us during meetings with some of the more important officials. He was our single most important liaison.

Besides shouldering most of the responsibilities of the institution's public interaction, Ravi also manages and guides thousands of volunteers who seek to perform service. Such service is referred to in Tirupati and Tirumala as Srivari Seva, meaning "service of the Lord."

"Srivari Seva offers a unique opportunity to devotees to serve fellow pilgrims in many different ways, " explains Ravi. "According to scriptures, divine grace can be attained not only by worshiping the Deity in the temple but also by serving His devotees. Through Srivari Seva, devotees double the benefit they receive from worshiping by performing selfless acts for other people like themselves."

According to Ravi, many of the devotees performing Srivari Seva are doctors, engineers, senior management executives and other highly qualified professionals. You would never know it to look at them. They all served so humbly, they melted into a divinity of oneness.

Whenever we visited Ravi, his office was always literally overflowing with volunteers

for Srivari Seva. These selfless servants were easy to spot. Not only were they always rushing forward to help, they also wore distinctive saffron-colored scarfs around their necks so they could be easily identified. Even the police ask them for help.

Thomas and I spoke with quite a few of these kindly souls. One particularly distinctive young lady made some insightful remarks about her service. "Performing Srivari Seva is a wonderful opportunity, " said Chennai resident Shri Priya, age 28. "Our main aim is to serve the devotees and pilgrims, although we also worship. No one checks up on our qualifications, because everyone qualifies to serve. I am an accountant by trade, but that means nothing here. I work side by side with some very sophisticated people. Some of them have great jobs and lots of money. Yet here we are all just human beings serving human beings. We get so immersed in seva that we sometimes forget to even take our own meals. We do not feel hungry when we are doing this work. Such is the greatness of this place."

It is traditional in South India for Balaji devotees to send out elaborate and often artistically designed invitations to important family ceremonial events like weddings. As might be expected, the TTD receives thousands of these invitations. What might not be quite as obvious is that someone affiliated with the institution--usually a devotee performing Srivari Seva--responds to each and every single one of these cards. Not only that, this person also arranges for a special temple ceremony to be performed in the name of the family that extended the invitation, as well as for sacraments from the ceremony to be sent to that family.

"Srivari Seva forms an integral part of worship at Tirumala, " explained Ravi. "It enlivens the spiritual life of the seekers and prepares them to act in accordance with the will of the Supreme Lord. Through Srivari Seva, TTD endeavors to perpetuate a noble tradition devotedly established by great saints who have passed before us. In the past five years, more than 68,000 volunteers have participated in Srivari Seva."

Although it has been said of the TTD that it is overly commercial in requiring some devotees to pay for darshan and guest house accommodations, it is my feeling that no serious pilgrim could come away from worshiping in Tirumala bearing this sort of criticism. For one thing, the spiritual power of Lord Balaji is so undeniably powerful in this place that money matters of any sort seem petty by comparison.

Aside from that, even from a secular point of view, there is no question about the fact that the TTD looks out for the common man with extraordinary dedication. Food, medical treatment and head shaving are all provided free of charge to the poor and the downtrodden.

Anyone performing Srivari Seva in Tirumala will tell you that the greatest spiritual benefits are enjoyed by those who serve the weakest and poorest of Balaji's devotees. I believe this myself with all my heart and long for my own opportunity to serve the servants of the Lord of Seven Hills in that place where my life was changed forever.

For more general information about the TTD and the Balaji temple contact: http:/www.tirumala.org To purchase an excellent book entitled Tirumala Tirupati the Legends and Beyond .... contact: http:/www.vqibooks,com

---

The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam

Like the many fingers of a few helping hands, the broad range of services and facilities offered by the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam, TTD, is legendary throughout India and around the world. Referring affectionately to the Institute's yearly budget of two million dollars for social services, one quick-witted pilgrim redefined "TTD " to mean "Tradition, Technology and the Devotee."Certainly, the TTD utilizes a unique blend of technology and tradition in its service of devotees. While a thousand years of tradition are strictly honored in the temples' ceremonial practices, fifty percent of the institute's power is derived from windmills and solar paneling.With 16 million people visiting Tirumala every year, technological efficiency is an important consideration that figures into all aspects of the institution's service. To minimize pilgrim's waiting time at the temple, for instance, computerized appointments for visits with Lord Balaji can be booked in advance at all major cities across India. The TTD also offers a variety of services in education and medical treatment, as well as the rehabilitation of the poor and handicapped. Two secular schools--one founded in 1876 in Vellore and the other in 1886 in Tirupati--are alive and well today, all because of the TTD. Ten square miles of forest are managed by the TTD via satellite. In the recent past, the institute planted 29,500 acres with 10 million saplings to protect the forests from fire. In addition to collecting rare Hindu scriptural manuscripts and teaching Indology, the Oriental

Research Institute--established by the TTD in 1939--promotes Indology through the publication of relevant anthologies, chrestomathies, translations, monographs, indexes, dictionaries, encyclopedias and more.