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SACRED CRAFT

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An American reporter marvels at the meeting of skill and devotion in Iraivan Temple's carving team

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We at Hinduism Today were pleased when our local Kauai newspaper, "The Garden Island, " took an interest in the Iraivan Temple being constructed at our headquarters. It is the first Chola-style stone temple built outside of India. On March 2, 2007, they ran this story of these remarkable craftsmen, the first of their clan to leave India and build a temple far from their home.

High above an emerald green valley, dripping with tropical vines and ancient trees, a gentle tapping of iron and stone fills sunlit hours. Six master stone carvers from Karakudi in Southern India are patiently carving the intricate details on pillars of granite, one chip at a time. The gentle tapping of the iron and stone is reflected in the hand-made monument that many would believe was carved from deafening machines and electric tools. The founding guru of this temple, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (Gurudeva, 1927-2001, also founder of hinduism today), is responsible for having chosen the site of the monastery as well as envisioning the cultural exchange that is now being carried out in order to build the permanent structure.

Added together, the six artists working on this place of worship have 98 years' experience--several began as young as 13 years old. This commission is called, by those involved, a unique and honorable work, as it is the first time that a Hindu temple is being fabricated with the identical traditional methods used in India over 1,000 years ago. The artisans work six days a week, for two years, before returning

to their home. When asked if this time away is a terrible hardship, they say, "It is a typical aspect of the stone carver's job to be away from home working on a site for several months per year. In addition, we are so pleased to be working on this project in Kauai and we see it as a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

The translator for the Tamil-speaking artisans, Yoginathaswami, who coordinates their work, added, "for this birth and perhaps many to come, they feel this is a unique and wonderful opportunity."

The tradition of carving in India is regarded differently depending on what it is one is carving. Temple carvers, silpis, hold a higher respect among Indian society than craftsman who make tools or everyday items. While three of Kauai's visiting artists came to the profession because their fathers or grandfathers also did the work, the other three came to it on their own, out of interest and desire. The training of the craft costs time and determination--it takes a minimum of six years to begin a professional career as a carver. Working one's way through apprenticeship in tools and labor eventually allows the aspiring carver time to practice on scraps lying about at the work site. Practicing chipping away at solid stone is done over lunch breaks and free time. Once the apprentice feels he is able to make rough forms, he approaches the construction coordinator out of his own volition to apply for a position. Several years are spent learning how to smooth surfaces and carve general pictorial forms, yet the exquisite details of Hindu temples are left only to the very experienced master silpis.

The temple structure is not erected simply by standing pillars and stone to form several chambers and entry ways. There is a sacred science that informs the architectural engineering of such a special space.

The temple architect, called a sthapati, is a trained engineer and designer who is fluently versed in the sacred mathematical formulas that are used to plan all temple structures. One of the silpis said, "For every 100 silpis, there are only two sthapati in India." While many silpis may aim toward one day becoming a sthapati, the "sacred knowledge of spiritual mathematics is dearly coveted, " said Yoginathaswami. The Iraivan Temple in Wailua is constructed based on an 11-foot, 7-1/4 inch pattern that was derived from calculations of astrological positioning, the temple's honored Deity, Siva, and the founding Gurudeva's name. This spiritual architectural calculation is meant to connect the divine and the material.

"From their perspective, even after years of professional expertise, the silpis have the technical knowledge, but they lack the theoretical wisdom used in the actual design of the space, " Yoginathaswami said.

The extensive meaning in each and every aspect of the temple, pictorially defining a complex theology, hints at the depth of how this structure is already a place of divinity and worship. The visiting artists feel that their experience working here has been "life-transforming and illuminating." They explained the drastic difference between working on a typical temple project in India and Kauai's temple, "We credit Gurudeva, the founder of the temple, for making the working experience be a spiritual experience. At other jobs, you arrive in the morning and work all day. If you make a mistake, you are fired on the spot. Gurudeva felt that this work should be peaceful and joyful. We begin each day with communal worship and prayer. This unites us in our cause and work, and the mood is carried throughout the day. No matter what our individual beliefs, we are united when it comes to this project. Gurudeva insisted that we carve everything by hand in the tradition of Hindu temples in India--this has greatly improved our skills as silpis."

The building of the temple begins on a large construction site in Bangalore, India, where the sthapati oversees many carvers who flesh out the pillars in rough form. As each of the 3,000 pieces of stone is completed, it makes its journey by sea to Nawiliwili Harbor on Kauai and up to the Wailua property to slowly be placed and then finished by the resident artisans. The details that the carvers are fashioning are so intricate and expansive that it is difficult to fathom this is all being done with rough chisels held by 12 hands.

On monthly outings over the past 20 months, the artisans have visited every tourist site on the island--from the famous Waimea Canyon to the wild jungles of Napali Coast. But when asked what their favorite spot to visit is, they sheepishly said, "Wal-Mart." The spectacle of "having everything from 100 stores in one single store is fascinating to them." Yoginathaswami said. "We have also taken them for coffee at the Grand Hyatt and Princeville Hotel--this is something they could never arrange to do in their own country." Tourist resorts are carefully guarded in India and non-guests are not allowed on the premises.

The two years the artists have spent working on Kauai seem short in the lifetime of the structure they are building. The silpis expressed their gratitude for the opportunity and experience, but the temple will last far beyond the years of any

current resident or worker. Chipping away at time is the task of these master craftsmen.

Yoginathaswami recounted a story from a recent visitor: "After touring the construction site, the visitor remarked how we often look at great world monuments, temples and ancient structures and wonder what it was like when they were building them. This is one we can all be witness to." Long after the temple is finished, the echoes of the "chip, chip, chip " of these silpi artisans will eternally be housed in the stone, and visitors from all over the world will marvel at who could have done this, and how.