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Impelled by the Needs of Their Children, Saivites In Edmonton Gather to Build a Sacred Shrine

On November 26th, 1981, the Maha Ganapati Society of Alberta was officially incorporated as a religious organization in the province of Alberta, Canada. The result of cooperative efforts of Edmonton's Eastern born and Western Saivites, the Society was formed to perpetuate the worship of Lord Ganesha in Alberta through the construction and maintenance of an orthodox Saivite temple complex. In addition, the Society is dedicated to fostering, promoting and perpetuating the growth of Saivite Hindu religious traditions in the province, and the religious and spiritual well-being of the Saivite community.

Prior to the official incorporation, a steering committee of eight members was formed on Ganesha Chaturthi in September of this year to draw up a constitution and file for incorporation. Since the official incorporation in late November, they now comprise the Board of Trustees: Sri J. Murugan - President; Sri T. Sivagnanam - Vice-President; Sri N. Paskaran - Secretary; Sri S. Sivakumaran - Treasurer; Sri a. Veylan - Assistant Secretary; Sri v. C. Nadesan - Assistant Treasurer; Sri S. Ganeshalingam and Mr. D. Selvarajah. Six of the Board members are Eastern born Saivites and two are Canadian converts.

This amalgamation of East and West began about four years ago, in 1977, in an effort to establish Ganesha worship in the community. A small group of Canadians, with a core of about four families, had been actively pursuing their religious devotions for nearly 12 years, including studying Saiva religion through the teachings of Saiva Siddhanta Church, and making occasional pilgrimages to India and Sri Lanka. They were preparing at that time for formal entrance into the religion through the Namakarana Samskara. While engaged in distributing the Church's religious literature to born Hindus, they were introduced to the Edmonton Tamil community - about 30 families from the Jaffna area of Sri Lanka. Having come into Saivism through Saiva Siddhanta Church, whose spiritual heritage and

authority can be traced to the famed Siva Yogaswami line of Sat Gurus of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, a natural and immediate affinity developed between the Canadian and the Sri Lankan Saivites. As Shanmuga Devam, a Canadian Saivite put it, "It's like the closing of a circle." Many of the older of the Tamil people here had actually met Paramaguru Siva Yogaswami. Some recalled sitting on his lap as a child.

In July of 1978, His Holiness Sivaya Subramuniaswami presented a black granite murthi of Ganesha to the group with his blessings and Ganesha puja immediately began. Daily puja has been performed ever since. At first the murthi moved about from home to home, but eventually settled in a room rented by the Hindu Society of Edmonton. At this time the entire Hindu community became involved and began attending the pujas. The major puja occurs on Sunday and attendance has steadily increased over the years. Now the present facility is too small, as Hindus come from all over the province to attend the pujas, particularly on Sunday. In explaining how he was drawn to the pujas, Sri Veepooshanan, who was named by Sat Guru Yogaswami, said that Ganesha was not is Ishta Devata, but he started to have visions and dreams of Lord Ganesha, so started to attend the pujas. "The vibration of this murthis is the same as in any temple back home." Shanmuga Devam, the murthi's pandaram pujari, explained that the room is so crowded on Sundays that if he leaves it after the puja, he is unable to squeeze back in. On special festival days, such as Ganesha Chaturthi, the Deity is moved to a more spacious hall where larger crowds can be accommodated.

The influx of Tamils over the past 5 to 6 years into the province of Alberta is directly tied into its oil-boom economy and a growing technology surrounding that industry. It is a field in which the professionally skilled Tamils are a considerable asset. Involved in Alberta's growth, they are putting down roots and raising families. With the constantly growing population of Tamil Saivites grows the need for religious facilities - the most fundamental of which is the Saiva temple. As well, the move to create a Ganesha temple stems from a collective concern for the spiritual education and well being of the many small children in the community. As a result of the regular Sunday pujas, the children are becoming aware of the Hindu way of worship. One Tamil Saivite commented, "They join the other children of the same age of doing bhajan, etc. and they get involved. All of the children are very young - most less than 12 years old. They are getting their strongest impressions at this age." Sri Paskaran, an engineer teaching at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology, has two sons, ages 8 and 3. In observing their needs, he says, "One reason for building the temple is for the spiritual upliftment of the adults, but the primary reason is for the children." Echoing this feeling, T. Sivagnanam added, "We have a real need for the traditional Saivite form of living here...I myself have four children born here in Canada. We cannot be following just garbage." Some forward strides in this area have been made already by the Hindu Society of Edmonton,

comprised of a broader section of the Hindu population, through the construction of a cultural/worship center. But the need for a traditional temple and solely religious-oriented organization persists. Sri Paskaran noted, "When people must move for economic reasons, it is great comfort to them to know that there is a temple there [Edmonton]." The Maha Ganapati Society hopes to contribute in filling this need.

The Maha Ganapati Temple will be approximately modeled, both in physical structure and in tradition of religious worship and protocol, after the Kumbalavalai Pillaiyar Temple of Alaveddy, Sri Lanka - a temple both familiar to and held in high regard by many of the Tamils of Edmonton, and as well by the Canadian Saivites who have worshipped there during previous pilgrimages to Sri Lanka. Besides familiarity, Kumbalavalai was chosen for its manageable size - not too small and not overly large - a consideration form-fitting the needs of the Edmonton community. Additionally, through a close contact with the Kumbalavalai Temple, via T. Sivagnanam, Vice-President of the Society, whose father was a Kumbalavalai Temple Trustee, it is hoped that a close working relation can be established between the two temple managements. Sivagnanam, who grew up almost next door to the Temple, commented that it may even be possible for a pujari from the Kumbalavalai Temple to fly over for the ground-breaking ceremony. But, as of yet, no formal connection has been established.

Construction of the temple complex is planned in three phases, employing traditional Agamic design. Nelamegham Stapathi of Mahabalipuram and the management of the Kumbalavalai Pillaiyar Temple will be the consultants. Future facilities of the temple may include classrooms and accommodations for visiting swamis and honored guests. A half-acre municipally subsidized lot in the city of Edmonton has been reserved for the temple site. The trustees say that if Lord Ganesha is happy with this location they will try to enter into a formal agreement with the city in January, 1982, to obtain use of the land. Coincidentally, four Saivite families had already bought property in the 4-block radius of the proposed temple site.

J. Murugan, President of the Society, stated that they are deeply aware of the slow and momentous task ahead and the need for committed people to help carry the load. The Board plans to reach out for assistance in their objective to the whole of Canada, to the U.S. and to overseas countries as well. Before officially starting a building fund or enrolling members, the trustees must wait for Federal recognition as a charitable religious organization. But in the meantime, Attorney A. Veylan, the Society's Treasurer, explained, they have begun polling the local community for

pledges. So far, he says, the response has been very heartening. Immediate plans include a fund-drive weekend in Calgary, to the South, and a mail campaign beginning with the large Hindu communities in Eastern Canada, then broadening out to U.S. and overseas mailing lists.