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Spiritual Leaders Join Flint Indian Community For Kumbabhishekam and Deity Installation

On October 27, 1982, under auspicious blue skies and unseasonably warm weather, Lord Siva was formally invoked with elaborate ritual to occupy the Paschima Kasi Sri Viswanatha Temple, located on a treeless 10-acre site 15 minutes Southwest of Flint, Michigan.

Hindus pilgrimaged from all over the U.S. to join the local Indian Hindu community to witness and herald the event. The program of dedication and consecration activities, murthi installation, blessings from religious leaders and cultural programs spanned a dynamic 10-day period, from October 22nd to October 31st. Swamis from around the world came as special guests, including octogenarian and saintly Swami Rama Tirtha; Swami Chinmayananda, loved and tireless servant to the spiritual needs of Indian Hindus in America; Swami Dayananda of Rishikesh, Sanskrit pundit and protector of the Hindu Dharma in America and India; Sat Guru Sant Keshavadas, divine bhakta and ardent early supporter of the Flint temple; Sri Sivaya Subramuniyaswami from Kauai Aadheenam in Hawaii, dedicated yeoman of orthodox Saivism; and Swami Saraswati of Sri Rajarajeswari Peetham of Pennsylvania, spirited propagator of traditional Hinduism.

Pre-inaugural pujas began on the 22nd as three priests took up residence in the Yajnasala (a temporary structure set up near the temple to house the granite deities until place in the temple). There, for five days they conducted elaborate homas, pujas and chanted the Vedas.

Then, on Wednesday, the 27th, amidst unabashed emotion and devotional cries of "Jai Ganesh" and "Om Namasivaya," several hundred joyful souls watched as the priests performed rituals to draw the shakti power from the Yajnasala to the

sanctums where the deities would be installed. The murthis were manually wheeled on dollies into the temple. First came Lord Ganesha, then Goddess Anna Poorna (Shakti), then two images of Lord Shiva: Lord Nataraja and the Siva Lingam, as well as the Nandi bull. Swami Dayananda performed the Prana Prathistha (seating and securing of the murthis) with the permanent Flint priest Pundit Ravichandran and two assisting priests, Pundit Venkatachari and Pundit Pandurangarao, from the Pittsburgh Venkateswara Temple. Five days later, on Sunday, October 31st, over 600 people crowded around to witness the Maha Kumbabhishekam, in which the deities were ceremoniously bathed in the water sanctified by the days of ritual and chanting.

At the public Inauguration Ceremony in the early afternoon, Dale Evans, Chairman Genesee County Board of Commissioners, indicated an open, friendly attitude toward the temple project among the non-Hindu community when he said, "I don't fully understand your religion with my ears, but I understand it completely with my heart. It is our honor to have all of you here in Flint. We are enriched by your presence, religion and culture." The special honored guest at the inauguration was Mr. Rajanikant Varma, Consul General of India.

Though the temple structure itself is at this stage (Phase I) externally plain in appearance (cinder block construction and no larger than a small one-story dwelling), the interior is reminiscent of any South Indian Agamic temple, with traditional sanctums and large bronze bells, though slightly more modern. Nearby stands the impressive, one-year-old Study Hall - a beautiful multi-purpose building for dance, music and theater, replete with guest facilities, a large kitchen and office and the Vidyanatha Medical Clinic, which offers free services to the public one day a week.

According to Hindu dharma and tradition, Hindus are obliged to live only where there is a temple, or to build a temple if they take up residence where there is none. And indeed, Indians Hindus all over America are building beautiful and grand temples and cultural halls. An early supporter of the Flint temple explained the feeling there, "We recognized that leaving our children money and a high standard of living was a small part of what we owe them. To give them a temple was to give them a religious and happy future of spiritual fulfillment." In a democratic nation, in which Church and state are separate, and hence government does no temple building (as the Hindu monarchs of ancient-day India did), this responsibility must be shared among the interested families. In many ways, Indians in America are well prepared for the task. As an ethnic group, they are the highest wage earners in the U.S. and the most highly educated.

The idea for a temple in Flint, Michigan, was first discussed in December, 1979. One month later, a preliminary study was complete. "Over the next two years countless obstacles really challenged us and our depth of dedication," recalls one committee member. An attempt to purchase a local church building and remodel it failed, despite much effort. An offer to purchase a site for a new temple building was accepted, but the zoning board refused a permit. Finally, the present site was located, a purchase offer accepted by the seller and the proper zoning obtained. Then the future of the project teetered as members of the core group doubted whether the project should continue in light of high costs of future operations, the serious and taxing responsibilities of maintaining a Siva temple and adjoining facilities and the minimal community support. But the tide turned as attention was drawn to the alternative of no temple. This inspired new confidence. Fund raising gained momentum, bank loans were obtained and ground-breaking for the Study Center took place in November 1980. On May 9th, 1981, temple construction was begun, and Phase I completed by the end of the year. During 1982, a visa was obtained for permament temple priest Pundit Ravichandran, the deities were ordered from India and fund-raising was escallated.

Mr. Hanumanthaiya Marur, a U.S. resident for 16 years, a practicing professional engineer, has been the central mainstay of the Flint Temple project from its inception, though he considers himself "only an instrument" and defers all praise to other stalwart members of the community. Over the past four or so years he has made three trips to India during which he did extensive, careful research of temple building and he also toured England and continental Europe, studying the structure of the old synagogues and cathedrals. When asked his advice for others building temples in the U.S., he answered, "Firstly, the feeling of building a temple should come from the heart. Overture to the American community where the Indian Hindus live should be made. Obtaining the Americans' support for the temple should be sought for based on convincing them that their help in building a Hindu temple will help the community by inculcating in the Hindu youth the high ethics of Hindu religious life, as well as bringing to America the great traditions and culture of India. Also, only people of like mind should work on the temple project, so that the project moves forward with unanimous agreement. There should not be a conglomerate of different opinion. No progress will be made.

The Hindu children who attended the week-long festivities at Flint were bubbling with joy at having their own temple. Siva Murugaswami, who accompanied Sivaya Subramuniyaswami to Flint, asked a group of children, "How is the temple different from the Study Hall?" Annapoorna Malyala answered quickly, "Oh, that's easy, God is over there (indicating the temple). Over here, at the Study Center, we eat, dance and stuff like that." Priya Gupta added, "That's the temple, where the Gods are. It's really important." Asked how they would feel if no temple had been built,

young Vidya said, "No temple, no Lingam, no Shiva. It would be awful. No swamis would come to teach us." Priya and Annapoorna added that it would be "Horrible; no place to sit quietly." Sejal Shah shyly said, "No temple? No fun. I wouldn't be able to see God. He blesses me. I pray for something and he gives it. I am glad we have the temple." Paulomi Raiji said, "No temple? I couldn't pray. God couldn't come there."

The children gleefully offered their thoughts on other topics too. Asked what they thought God Shiva likes, Vidya answered, "He likes to dance and sing. He likes people that are good...and people that are bad too." Asked what she liked most about the temple, Priyanka Gupta said, "I like the way they do the pujas. My really favorite thing is how our priest, Ravichandran, concentrates while he chants during the puja and never makes mistakes." Annapoorna said, "I like it when they give a bath to God and pour the milk over Him. It's so beautiful." Asked what the hardest thing to understand about Hinduism was, Vidya quickly rejoined, "It's when you are small and go to a religious class with big kids and they all talk about big stuff and you are too small to understand!" Sejal Shah said, "The hardest thing is seeing where God lives."

So, orthodox temple worship is now part of the daily life of Hindus in Flint Michigan. Young girls studying Bharatya Natyam worship the original exponent of the art, Lord Nataraja. Boys and girls are attending Hindu classes taught by Sanskrit teacher Brahmachariya Prabhu. The future of the temple? In the words of Mr. Marur, "We did our part. We got the loans. We built a home for God. Now the money to run the temple well is His concern. He will do His part now. We are not worried."

The modest temple structure housing the three sanctums and connecting hall built of concrete blocks is still only the core of the future, grandiose complex, lovingly named "Kasi West," (after Kasi, India, also known as Varanasi and Benares, a city so sacred, it is said that to die there brings one liberation from rebirth). But the naming, "Kasi West," is not a matter of mere sentiment. As Mr. Marur explained, "A spiritual master came here and studied this property and its special characteristics [one of which is that the river that flows by it makes a 180 degree turn on the property, just as the river Ganges does at Kasi, India]. After his study, he was quite moved and said, 'This is really Kasi." But Mr. Marur is cautious of glamorizing too much about the future: "We never want people to be disappointed," he says, "so we'll be happy with what we have now - a wonderful priest, a beautiful temple with daily services - and proceed with further embellishment one step at a time."

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