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Utah Hindu community gets a big helping hand with their dream temple

Aditya Vinadhara, Utah

In May 5, 2003, the Salt Lake City Tribune reported, "Ganesha's devotees gave Him a housewarming, bathing the icon again in milk, honey, yogurt, grain, and offering sacrifices, or homa, on fires in a tented space next to the temple. A symbolic string ran from the fire to the icons, connecting all the Deities and conducting the prayers and offerings to them. Many friends and guests joined the celebration, including the president of the local LDS (Latter-Day Saints) ward. Far from the solemn rites used in most Christian religious rituals, the Hindu consecration was a high-energy, joyous and sensuous celebration. The temple was filled with the smell of incense and oranges; horns were blowing, drums beating and tambourines jangling while the crowd, dressed in vivid silks and saris, chanted aloud and children laughed and played patty-cake between prayers. After the final sacrifice and before the feast, priests drew the red curtain back once again to reveal Ganesha, draped in flowers and garlanded with leaves and jewels."

This warm and friendly news report captured the magic of a long-awaited event in the Hindu community for which hundreds had donated time and money. It was also one manifestation of the open welcome for the Hindus here in Utah, where most of the local people are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, also known as the Mormons, a conservative Christian denomination.

Our odyssey to this point began in 1993 when I asked the one Hindu family I knew in the area why there was no Hindu temple in Utah. My friend, Ram Natesh, could give no reason. So on August 15 of the same year, I asked him to introduce me to other Hindu families during the India Independence Day celebrations conducted by

the India Forum at International Peace Garden's Park. There I met Neel Neelameggham and told him I'd like to help start a Hindu temple for the community. He, in turn, introduced me to others at the event who might take an interest. Finally I stood up on a picnic table and addressed the entire group. I said I had spoken with Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami (Gurudeva), and asked if he would come and help us get a temple started as he had done in so many other cities and countries. The group responded very favorably.

As it worked out, Gurudeva came to Salt Lake City a few weeks later, on September 5. His message was simple. "Begin the worship," he said. "Meet once a month at the same time and place, and do not worry about any fundraising at this time." He was inspired by the large turnout during his visit here and offered to donate the granite Ganesha statue for the temple as he had done for dozens of temples worldwide.

A year-and-a-half later, I received a fax stating a 750-pound crate awaited me in Oakland, California. My wife and I hopped in our small truck and drove 700 miles to pick up Lord Ganesha. On the way back to Utah, I called Gurudeva, and he asked, "Do you have a home for Him?" I said, "The Neelamegghams had offered their home a year ago, so we'll take Him there. Should I call first?" "No," said Gurudeva, "they may change their mind."

So, at 9:00 pm, just as Neel and Indra were about to retire for the evening, we knocked on their door. We were welcomed in and offered food as if this was just a casual visit. "We have something for you," I said. "We brought Ganesha." Their eyes got big. Alan, their nephew, got on the phone and invited eight of his strong friends over and, with great effort, we got the crate into the house and opened. In 1996, the Neelamegghams moved to South Jordan, about 15 miles south of Salt Lake City. They bought a larger house with a full basement where we placed Ganesha. The basement was always open to the public, and this was the real beginning of the temple.

After years of searching, we found a beautiful, four-acre parcel with a breathtaking view of the Rocky Mountains to the east. We bought this parcel and paid it off. Architectural plans followed, and we began fundraising. The contractor's bid for the job came in at \$850,000 but with Neel and Indra stretching each dollar, and a great deal of volunteer work, we got it done for \$580,000 none of it borrowed. Surprisingly, the LDS church donated \$25,000 to the project. Brent Robison, liaison

between the Jordan River Ridge LDS Stake (congregation) and us, told the Salt Lake Tribune, "It's not something the church boasts about, but it comes from one of the foundations. We welcome the Hindus and love and honor them as neighbors." Later, close to the dedication ceremony, the local Stake offered to help with the landscaping. Headed up by their expert horticulturist and grounds keeper, Alex Morris, thirty to sixty LDS volunteers showed up each Saturday for four weeks in a massive showing of community support.

A week before the May 4 ceremonies, we moved Ganesha. We built a grand chariot, held a slow, mile-and-a-half parade from Neelamegghams to the new temple, with many Hindus walking and singing, nagaswaram temple music blaring from a CD player. As we neared, the entire Hindu community was there to welcome Ganesha. They ran forward with tears in their eyes, joyous that this long-awaited day for Ganesha to enter His new home had arrived.

The temple is, admittedly, austere, constrained by our "pay as we go" policy. But it has all the essentials, including a heated concrete floor to keep the barefoot devotees comfortable in Utah's cold winters, and a covered verandah encircling the main building.

The Maha Kumbhabhisheka to dedicate the temple was performed from May 2 to May 4 under the guidance of our permanent priest, Pundit Shashidhara Somayaji, with three assistant priests flown in from temples in California, Boston and Ohio.

Many said we were too small a community just 300 families and 100 students to build and support a temple. Despite our numbers and diverse backgrounds, we managed to overcome many obstacles, remain a harmonious working group (as Gurudeva often advised us) and got the temple built debt-free. Already our monthly income is sufficient to meet on-going expenses. We believe this temple will be a place to pilgrimage to, as many have commented how special it already feels. Our plans now include building the community center, elderly housing and day care and creating an endowment for the future. Nothing can describe the joy of seeing this project finished with so many to benefit. And yes, we expect it to last 1,000 years.

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