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Indian craftsmen create a US\$1.4 million masterpiece in Kuala Lumpur

More than 10,000 Hindus from Malaysia and Singapore thronged the Sri Kandaswamy Temple on Scott Road in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur, on March 24th morning for the temple's mahakumbha abhishekam. Twenty-eight priests, some flown specially from India, Sri Lanka and England, conducted the rituals to reconsecrate the completely rebuilt temple. Shouts of "Muruga," "Shanmuga" and "Kantha" roared forth from the crowd as at precisely 10:55 am priests on narrow scaffolding surrounding the temple towers poured sacred water from India's Ganga, Yamuna, Brahmaputra, Godavari and Kaveri rivers over the gold kalasam (spires). Arati lights were offered to the towers, as devotees below were showered with flowers and sacred water. Following the consecration and spiritual enlivening of the sanctuary, each individual Deity was ceremoniously installed inside.

Sri Vaitheeswara Sabaratnam Gurukkal, chief priest of Urumparai Sri Karunakam Pillaiyar Temple in Sri Lanka, flew to Malaysia to advise on the 48 days of continuous ceremonies which were directed by Kandaswamy Temple's chief priest, Sabaratna Parameswar Linganathar.

Hindu temples are normally repaired and rededicated every twelve years, but in this case a reconstruction from ground up

was undertaken. Thiru S. Perampalam, chairman of the temple committee explained, "In 1984 we discovered the foundation had to be reinforced, so we resolved to reconstruct the temple completely. After this, we sought a general consensus among the temple members and began construction a few years later." A further motivation was to upgrade the temple's presence as the area had become surrounded by modern apartment buildings.

On January 24, 1992, the Deities were moved to a temporary shelter and the original building demolished. Local firms did the major construction, and twenty temple craftsmen brought from India under the supervision of Sthapati G. Vanmeeganathan executed the intricate stonework and plaster sculptures on the exterior and interior.

A small but intense controversy arose early regarding the permanent installation of a Sri Raja Rajeswary Deity in the "Vayu" corner of the temple. Some members objected to the presence of the Goddess in a Murugan temple. After consulting with Sivacharyas in Sri Lanka and India, the dispute was settled in 1993 in favor of installing the Goddess as an Utsava Parivara Moortham (moveable, parade Deity). Other aspects of the temple not in accord with scripture were also corrected, especially the location of the navagraha (nine planets) and the shrine for Saturn.

The new edifice boasts India's finest craftsmanship, with marble tiled walls and floors. The Deities and shrines are granite and display ornate motifs and carvings. The 33-foot kodimaram (central flag pole under a glass enclosure) is gold

plated, and a \$33,600 gold kudam (ceremonial pot) was acquired for Lord Murugan's abhishekam (ritual bath). Heavy teak doors greet worshipers at the main entrance. A \$200,000 set of ornate arches flanking the temple are still under construction. "It is not mere artistry," said craftsman supervisor Lakshmanan of Kerala, India, "We are literally creating Gods. The whole art is absorbing simply because it is so reverential. Our concentration is, of course, heightened by the chanting of a mantra and a supplication that accompanies the act of creation." Perampalam expressed the community's vision for the new temple, "It is not only an extension of faith, but a center to inculcate knowledge and awareness of that faith. When it reopens, we will stress these points. Knowledge, after all, will lead to harmony, and where better to obtain it than in a temple?"

Origins: The "Ceylonese" (as they are still known) community who own the temple are descendants of thousands of English-educated Sri Lankan Hindus brought to Malaysia at the end of the 19th century. They helped the British plan and build the railway system, and staffed hospital and governmental clerical services. Large numbers of South Indians came at the same time. But they were put to work as laborers on the railway and in plantations, while Sri Lankans, by virtue of their ability in English, gained better posts. Over the years the two groups have remained distinct, with minimum social interaction and virtually no intermarriage. Initially, the Sri Lankans benefitted from their better education and higher incomes, but now the groups are about equal in social and economic status.

By the end of the 19th century, a sizeable concentration,

dubbed "Little Jaffna," had formed in the area of Brickfields (near central Kuala Lumpur), because of its proximity to the railway administration center. It was this group that met in 1890 and set in motion plans for the Lord Subramaniam temple. A community elder received a vision of a temple at a site located at the end of Scott Road, at Klang River. It was acquired shortly thereafter. The temple developed slowly over the years. In 1927 a new organization, the all-Hindu "Ceylon Saivites Association," assumed management from the original Selangor Ceylon Tamil Association, some of whose members were of other faiths.

The Japanese invaded Malaysia in December, 1941, and occupied it until 1945. The Scott Road area was deserted, the water supply cut off, food was scarce and the temple's bank accounts were frozen. The priest and several devotees remained, carrying on the pujas and temple affairs even as first Japanese and later American bombs rained from the sky. The temple well supplied water for the neighborhood, and kanji (rice porridge) was distributed daily.

As normalcy returned after war, the temple's development resumed. In the 1950s, religious classes on Saiva Siddhanta were instituted for youth, along with the learning of Tamil Devaram, sacred hymns by the saints. By 1965 the temple boasted a library, offices and dining facility. In 1973 a 700-seat wedding hall was dedicated by then Prime Minister of Malaysia, YAB Tun Abdul Razak bin Dato Hussein. The First National Saiva Siddhanta Conference, convened in 1983 and chaired by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, with dozens of religious leaders and scholars from around the world, was the largest such religious conference held to date in Malaysia. Following

the temple's renovation and rededication in 1984, plans were laid for the reconstruction just completed. Chairman Perampalam offered, "Our committee is happy to leave behind a culturally, religiously and financially rich temple for posterity. We pray to Lord Murugan that our forthcoming generations will perpetuate and nurture their rich heritage and lead a prosperous and noble life."

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With reports from Eddin Khoo and K. Anuradha of The Star, from the Tamil language Malaysia Nanban and Ramesh Sivanathan, Kuala Lumpur.