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Published by Anonymous on Sep. 01, 1997

TRAGEDY

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Thirty-nine perish at reconsecration ceremonies for Thanjavur Siva Temple in South India

While pilgrimaging to the temples of South India, Hinduism Today Deputy Managing Editor, Yogi Kashinatha, was present June 7, 1997, when a tragic fire broke out during massive ceremonies. His eyewitness account:

Fireworks burst above us, their glowing embers drifting effortlessly across the temple courtyards. From inside the main temple, we first noticed flames reach over the far corner wall. One leapt and subsided, then another. Our focus was riveted. We said, as if hoping it were not true, but knowing in an instant that it was, "That's the yagasala!" The flames paused momentarily, then flared in unmistakable fury. Sparks, embers and smoke billowed up forcefully from the intense heat below. We prayed the fire would somehow be put out before going too far, but knew this was the farthest point from the fire truck. A sea of terrified people were huddled in between. The flames leapt higher and with more force. At their height they equalled one of the temple towers. We heard no screams from the other side; it was an eerie sight. We were awestruck, in shock, totally helpless. We knew the yagasala was being consumed and lives were being lost. We had been there just minutes earlier. The temple's interior was filled with thousands of people. All lights were turned off after the fire began--making it more dominating and ominous. It burned strong for an hour, consuming the temporary wood-and-nylon pavilion where special rites and homas are held. A single fire truck parked next to the yagasala contained no water to fight the blaze. Thirty-nine devotees died and 250 were injured in the stampede to escape. They were mostly elderly women already tired and unable to cope with the crowd. A priest heard cries of "Siva, Siva!" from the dying.

Earlier in the evening, we mingled with the 30,000 pilgrims gathered to celebrate in this temple town of Thanjavur. Music and chanting blared while colorful lights flashed. Inside the yagasala, fifty homa fires were tended by 120 Sivacharya priests. Though there was no visible outlet for the considerable heat and smoke, there was never any sense of danger.

This was only the fourth reconsecration of Brihadeeswara in 1,000 years. For the event, a giant yagasala structure, 400 by 300 feet, was constructed of synthetic material and covered with a low, thatched palm leaf roof. Preceding days of ceremonies had parched this roof to tinder dryness. The days-long ceremony involving more than one hundred priests "recharges" the temple. As part of this process, all the power of the temple Deities is temporarily transferred by the Sivacharyas into brass kumbhas (water vessels). These are placed in the yagasala while the main sanctum is cleaned and renovated. These kumbhas became the main concern after the fire was put out and victims had been cared for. We were that told the priests successfully seized all the primary kumbhas, and only two priests suffered burns. Had the main kumbhas been lost, 1,000 years of accumulated energy would have been dispersed, a major disaster.

The priests sought advice from H.H. Swami Jayendra Saraswati, Shankaracharya of the venerable Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham (monastery), who was at the moment in Shimla, North India. He advised they proceed with the ceremonies, and two days later the ritual was completed. Afterwards, H.H. Arunagirinatha Sri Gnanasambanda Desika Paramachariya Swamikal, head of Madurai Aadheenam, the oldest monastery in South India, disagreed with this timing. He said, "Immediately performing it after the fire was wrong. Since there were multiple deaths, it should have been postponed for at least a year. Organizers should have asked the Saiva Aadheenams' advice rather than the Shankaracharya, because the temple is of the Saivite tradition, not the Smarta."

This tragedy is not alone. Just a few days later 60 perished in a New Delhi theater, and last February, 204 died in Orissa. Politicians flung charges and countercharges. The Tamil Nadu state government said it could not insist on preventative measures in this temple's case, because it is controlled by the Central Government as a UNESCO world heritage monument--at 216 feet, its

main tower is Asia's tallest. H.H. Swami Gautamananda of the Ramakrishna Mission, Chennai, said devotees should take an active role at events. "At least 1,000 volunteers to ensure safety and comfort of devotees should be trained. Fire fighters, emergency exits, and restraining of all causes of fire should be arranged. In this case almost none were there to help."

Asked for a mystical explanation of this event, H.H. Sri Sri Sri Trichy Mahaswamikal of Kailasa Ashram, Bangalore, said there were "drawbacks in the performance of the temple rituals." He discounted such explanations as the removal for cleaning of the 12-foot gold kalasa on top of the temple. He consoled, "The dead are punyavan (meritorious), for they would have uttered God's name at the time of death. I am convinced of their auspicious departure since they left their mortal coil at the holy temple. Karma's law is subtle but clear--welfare ensues from good deeds and misery from bad deeds. The afflicted have to recollect their past deeds and atone piously as they are able."

Another saint offered, "It is said that whatsoever one has on his mind at the time of the great departure is the destination within the inner lokas, and sets the pattern for the next life on Earth. Those blessed souls, who had Supreme God Siva on their mind and in their hearts at this most auspicious occasion, who were taken up by His fire of grace are thrice blessed. Some attained moksha, freedom from rebirth, others a place in the Brahma Loka at His feet and the assurance of an excellent birth having, through His fire of grace, cooked the seeds of past karmas."