Special Feature: A Goddess Nutures Her Golden Temple
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Special Feature

A Goddess Nurtures Her Golden Empire

Gold--no other metal evokes as much speculation and awe. But in Sri Mahalakshmi Narayani Temple, Vellore, founder Sakthi Amma connects gold with the divine, not the mundane. Here the Goddess of eternal abundance is worshiped with fervor, zeal--and with gold, creating successive waves of prosperity that support a vast network of social services, earth-friendly projects and pilgrimage facilities.

Going against the current of today's media-crazed world, the Golden Temple had so far avoided the news' spotlight. Hinduism Today received unprecedented access to Sripuram for this rare report.

By Rajiv Malik, Sripuram

Around the ancient region of Vellore, Hinduism has historically flourished. The city, considered one of the oldest settlements in India, lies almost equidistant between Thiruvannamalai and Tirupati, two temples of repute and legend. But since 2007, a new place of worship has quickly risen as a top pilgrimage destination. Sripuram is the most visible achievement of the Sri Narayani Peedam, a dynamic organization led by the spiritual leader called Sakthi Amma, a young, self-proclaimed avatar of the Goddess.

It is easy to find the Sri Mahalakshmi Narayani Golden Temple, as Sripuram is officially called. Just look for a temple completely clad in pure, shining gold, a magnificent edifice at the center of a sprawling 100-acre complex.

The temple was consecrated on August 27, 2007, after six years of construction. The chief architect was Subbaya Sthapati from Kanchipuram, an expert in Vastu

(the sacred art of Hindu temple and home building) who had previously designed several temples in Tamil Nadu. At any given time during construction, 800 to 1,000 artisans, sculptors, masons and craftsman worked on the site.

The main structure is made of concrete. On top of it, traditional temple materials were applied, such as copper, gold and special woods, crafted according to Sakthi Amma's instructions. Amma, the Peedam's charismatic 34-year-old founder, was deeply involved in the design of the new temple. "Amma is the architect behind all that you see in this temple. Amma is a great artist herself, and provided plenty of drawings for this project," says Suresh Babu, manager of the temple, who was in charge of the construction. [Devotees of Sakthi Amma refer to him using the femine pronoun, thus honoring the presence of the Goddess in him over the masculine bodily form.] Suresh Babu adds, "We are tools of this whole creation done by Her. You can see artistic work at each and every place here."

Art and harmony are highly regarded in Sripuram, as are the artists themselves. "Amma said the temple should be made only through the artisans, so no machines were used for the ornamentations. Everything done in gold plating or metal work is hand laid," Suresh Babu explains.

In the technique used to add metal to the structure, several tons of 800-gauge copper sheets were partially sculpted and molded to the concrete. Finishing work was then done on site: nine to fifteen layers of gold foil, made locally from bullion bars weighing as much as a kilo, were pasted over the copper. "It was challenging work. We have done the gold plating in such a way that even the copper will not react. We have seen this work elsewhere also in some ancient temples in which the gold-plated kalasha is still in good shape even after three hundred years. The whole procedure is very simple and is a traditional one, but time consuming. Six years is a short period for this kind of project. We worked day and night," Babu recalls.

The herculean effort created a modern marvel drawing 25,000 to 30,000 visitors each day and more on weekends. Admission is free. During festivals and on other special days, up to 100,000 are estimated to visit the golden temple. By comparison, the daily average for Tirupati stands around 50,000.

What attracts such multitudes? Stories about the opulence and awe of the temple

travel far, of course; but pilgrims also find verdant surroundings, a well-kept structure and an ambiance of peace. "I liked the temple so much; the atmosphere is calm and beautiful," said Shivani Bomzen, 18, from Darjeeling, during her first visit. "This is one of the cleanest temples I have seen in India," adds Rohit Iyer, 19, a student at the Vellore Institute of Technology.

Stories of visions, healings and mystical experiences draw people from afar. Madivanen, who owns a beauty salon in Malaysia, is on her second visit. "Last year when I came I developed a very special bond with the Deity here," she shares. "This time I came to ask for blessings to heal some of my relatives who are not well."

Following the directions of Amma, the temple became a unique structure, only partially based on Agamic architecture. Amma carefully planned the devotees' experience, including an elaborate way to reach the sanctum.

The long path toward the temple begins with a straight stone walkway adorned with water fountains, sculptures and kolams etched on the pavement. It clearly impresses the mind that this is a special place, and that the world--in its most mundane, polluted and noisy form--has been left behind. Arriving at the end of the initial wide corridor, the pilgrim looks out upon carefully manicured surroundings (photo on the right). Just ahead are three archways. The one in the center, leading directly to the temple, is a shortcut only open on special occasions. The entrance on the left takes one to the 1,500-meter-long Star Path, a creation of Amma that surrounds the Sripuram temple. The gate on the right is where people exit after circumanbulating and visiting the holy shrine.

The Star Path has the form of a shatkona, or six-pointed star. The intent is to emulate the ideals of a traditional pilgrimage. All those who want to see the Goddess and ask for Her blessings will prepare themselves, enjoying the journey as an integral part of the religious experience. Amma explained, "Generally, when you go to a temple, you go straight to the sanctum through a few gopurams and prakarams. But Sripuram is not like that. While devotees walk through the Star Path, on both sides they can see spiritual quotes from Amma in many languages. They answer common questions, 'Why does one need bhakti?' 'What is the point of devotion?' 'Why act according to dharma?' These quotes convey basic values of humanity."

The paths comprise a queue system that can hold five thousand people at once, with rest areas furnished with chairs and bathrooms.

The green surroundings have a soothing effect. Exquisite gardens and the many sculptures set the mood as devotees progress to the temple. The nearby hills, which can be seen from the path, are integral to the complex. Thirty thousand neem trees were planted on the nearby Kailashgiri hill, as part of a large forestation project initiated by Amma's organization.

Along the lengthy corridors of the Star Path, spirits are high and anticipation builds. The flow of pilgrims is orderly. Families talk to each other while walking and make new acquaintances. Most pilgrims are beautifully dressed, especially the women, who wear traditional saris. The rare few in Western clothing are politely taken to the nearby shops and encouraged to buy a sari or a dhoti and kurta, or just anything less informal.

Most of the hosting is done by volunteers. "Our volunteers are well trained, and they handle people with a lot of calm," Suresh Babu tells us. "We have many devotees helping with tasks from hosting to even managing the temple. But Sripuram also has nearly 1,000 paid employees." Most of them work in areas unseen by the public.

After the long walk, pilgrims finally enter the temple. Some describe it as an overwhelming experience, others say they feel a sense of peace. One and a half metric tons of gold greet the pilgrim, covering every visible surface except the floor. The shining metal, valued at more than US$70 million by 2010 prices, creates a stunning impression. Crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling add to the marvel and lead to the unmistakable conclusion: this is Mahalakshmi's palace.

While gold is often used in Hindu temples for its unique mystical properties (see sidebar on page 25), Agamic scriptures do not prescribe gilding the full temple but only specific parts of it. As in many other activities in this organization, Amma's insights and instructions took precedence over tradition.

The gold, Amma explains, is like the sugar coating of a pill. "People are materialistic these days. Gold will attract to the temple even the most materialistic person. After experiencing all this, Narayani's abundance, they can finally turn to more spiritual pursuits. The gold might attract them, but the values they learn here will make them better people, and that will change the world."

Finally--at the center of the star, inside what feels like the Holy Mother's heart of gold--devotees see the Goddess and receive Her darshan.

The Deity at Sripuram is Goddess Mahalakshmi Narayani, an aspect of the Goddess Narayani, who, according to Amma, is the unification of Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. He explains, "Narayani is the Supreme Goddess, 'Adi Parashakti,' as clearly explained in the 12th chapter of the Devi Mahatmya, the most authoritative scripture on the Goddess."

The name Narayani had been seldom used in recent centuries, and that mostly in Kerala. It would normally refer to any one of the three main Goddesses, not to a being comprising them all. Narayani is most commonly identified with Lakshmi, Vishnu's feminine counterpart, since Lord Narayana is another name for Vishnu, meaning "refuge of men."

To Sakthi Amma, this is not a new tradition. Goddess Narayani is eternal; She has been the consummation of Durga, Lakshmi and Sarasvati since time immemorial. "Narayani is a mirror in which you can see the reflection of any of the three Devis you want to worship," says Amma. "Man does wrong when lacking strength, prosperity or wisdom. Each form of Narayani provides for one of these."

Sri Narayani's stone murti was also conceived and designed by Amma. The granite was quarried, brought to the temple site and carved under his careful supervision.

Worship of the Goddess is performed numerous times each day. Before dawn, at 4:30, in a procession led by elephants and enlivened by the sound of resident nadaswaram players, devotees carry silver pots (kalasham) full of water to the sanctum. The priests, walking in the procession, chant mantras from the Sama

Veda. The Deity is bathed with the water. Then follows a two-and-a-half-hour puja. At 8 am the temple is opened to the public. Food (naivedyam) is served to the Deity at noon, and seven kala aratis are done through the day at auspicious hours.

Rituals in Sripuram are partially inspired by traditional Agamic worship, as in most of South India. They also incorporate Amma's directions and a strong influence from the Vedas.

The Chief Priest, Ramasubramania Sharma, 58, is a renowned specialist in the Sama Veda. Ramana, as he is called, leads a team of fifty priests who are from various schools and two primary traditions, Vedic and Agamic.

"I initially came here to chant Vedic mantras during the kumbhabhishekam," explains Ramana, who was trained in Kumbhakonam. "It was Amma who gave me diksha (initiation) and empowered me to perform pujas."

In spite of their different training, the two groups of priests representing the Agamas and the Vedas work together. Ramana explains, "The Sivacharyas here perform pujas as per the Aghorashivacharya Paddhati, following the Kamika Agama. On the other hand, my pujas or chantings are based on the Sama Veda. Ours is an amalgamation of both traditions. Pujas performed by Amma also have a tantric element."

Pujas in Sripuram tend to be simpler than those in the Peedam's other temples in the region. Though Sripuram is the crown jewel, the others are still active.

The first temple of what would become the Narayani Peedam organization was established in 1992, to house a Swayambhu Sivalingam that was discovered in fulfillment of a prophecy made by Amma.

A second temple, built over a period of four years and consecrated in 2001, is called Sri Narayani Temple--the first ever built for Goddess Narayani. At its

kumbabhishekam, the mantra of the Deity was collectively chanted one billion times by 750 priests over a period of nine days.

Later, to accommodate the huge crowds, Amma built the enormous Shanti Mandapam (Hall of Peace). There, devotees witness daily pujas to Goddess Sri Narayani performed by Amma himself. The blessed tirtham water that Amma sprinkles on the faithful after the ceremony is believed to heal ailments and impart blessings. "Many devotees have benefitted from the blessed tirtham water," Ramana testifies. "The water becomes powerful when Amma puts his hands on it. Through Amma's tapas it becomes charged with energy."

Sripuram might be the holy cynosure, but the Sri Narayani Peedam goes beyond the golden marvel. Widely popular, undeniably vibrant, it has a spiritual might that draws equally from tradition and the insights of Amma in an unorthodox but potent mix. Priest Ramana summarizes, "There are things that pertain to Devaloka and cannot be understood just by logic. The ways of a siddha purusha (perfected soul) are one such thing."

Gold and silver's mystical effects

Scriptures in Hinduism originate from clairvoyant revelation or divine inspiration. With mystics as its de facto leaders, the Sanatana Dharma is revitalized anytime a legitimate guru or saint reaches into the inner worlds.

The founder of Hinduism Today, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, had an unanticipated encounter with that process soon after the iconic murti of Kadavul Nataraja arrived at his Kauai monastery in 1973. To his third eye vision, a vast library with an array of great manuscripts was opened. It was the library of Lord Subramaniam, Siva's son.

In the visions that followed, the librarian--a tall, fine, elegantly robed, bearded man--would pull forth from one shelf or another great volumes and open and turn the pages to the proper place to be read. First to be transcribed were the Lemurian Shastras, later published as part of a book entitled Lemurian Scrolls. They describe the esoteric aspects of the inner workings of monasteries and temples, including the effect of gold, in a treatise written by an anonymous monk in the era of a

remote yuga. Read an excerpt on the next page.

From the Lemurian Shastras by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

We had a gold substance that came from the ground, and silver, too. Of this we made jewelry to decorate the physical body and make it look like that of the Deity and devas. This gold and silver could be seen, even in the World of the Gods, glowing. The people in the surrounding country side would dig it out of the mountains, find it in their rivers and streams and bring it to us. As was our custom, we kept one third of it in the temple and fashioned jewelry for our bodies from the other two thirds. We prided ourselves in this skill, of which we had many. This gold and silver jewelry made by us carried the darshan from the monastery wherever it was taken. Walking through the monastery and temple, one could see large piles of gold and silver here and there, and in the World of the Gods each monastery and temple could be easily distinguished because of the vast quantities of gold and silver it contained. It glowed there as a marker of the destination point so that Deities and devas would know where to come.

The Story of a Man Called Amma

Women are naturally intuitive, transcending simple logic, so it is fitting that a Goddess' designs are beyond the grasp of mere reason. To select a man to manifest the works of the Goddess might seem puzzling, but the devout say that there could be no better choice.

Sakthi Amma was born on January 3rd, 1976. Birth symbols on the baby's skin are said to have heralded his divinity, a tilak on the forehead along with a chakra and a conch on either sides of his chest--symbols associated with Goddess Lakshmi.

The child soon showed deep interest in spirituality. Dr. N. Balaji, Amma's brother and director of the Sri Narayani Hospital, recalls, "With his pocket money he used to buy pictures of Murugan, Ganesha and Balaji and build a small mound as a shrine. He did pujas, offering jaggery and peanuts, reading mantras."

The family was concerned. Balaji explains, "My mother and father started to monitor his activities. To outsmart them, Amma would keep his traditional temple wear in his school bag and after school go straight to the temple." No amount of

scolding could change his mind.

At age fifteen, he announced to his family he was becoming a renunciate and moved out, living alone in an empty rental house that his family owned. The house had been vacant for some time because of a putthu (a mound with a snake pit) in the back yard. Amma meditated for long hours by the putthu and offered mud from it as a healing prasadam to those who came to see him. His fame began to grow as tales of miracles spread.

Shortly after his 16th birthday, Amma had a defining experience. Sitting on a bus on his way to school, he felt a ray of energy emerging from his body, which projected onto the sky, forming an immense vision of Goddess Narayani. She was adorned in white, holding a conch, the chakra and a lotus, giving blessings. The image then dissipated and returned, as a shining ray, back into Amma's body. On May 8, 1992, the young man proclaimed that he was the avatar of the Goddess, Sri Narayani. Raji Murli, a dancer from Bengaluru and close devotee of Amma, recounts, "Amma says that Vellore, centuries ago, was a dense forest where sages performed penance. They earned a boon, and it was promised that Sri Narayani would descend as an avatar."

Amma's fame spread like wildfire in the following years. Siddhis (miraculous powers) were reported by devotees. Many were impressed by his intuitive knowledge. Raji Murli recalls a famous story of a woman who, doubting Amma's divinity, was asked by Amma to close her eyes. "She saw Goddess Narayani sitting on a lion. The Goddess declared, 'Whenever dharma declines and adharma rises, I take birth in the world. Now I am born as Narayani. My name is Sakthi Amma.' "

Sushumna Dasi, 70, who has been a devotee for eleven years, spares no praise. "After I attended Amma's full-moon puja, I was convinced that Amma is an avatar, a God-like person. I am impressed by her humility. She offers unconditional love. I have never ever seen Amma being judgmental."

Ramana, the chief priest, tells his own story. One day he had the impression that the stone image of the Goddess in the temple looked fierce, almost angry, but he told no one about it. "To my amazement, Amma summoned me the next day and asked me how the Goddess looked, because he had performed some special pujas

to calm Her down."

Natalie Cederquist, a sculptor who lives in Arizona, remembers her first encounter, which happened in New York. "I could feel Amma as pure energy. I felt happy like a little child. My husband, Jim Levin, says that Amma is divine light coming unadulterated from a crystal clear window."

Most of Amma's time is spent doing unfailing daily pujas to Narayani, including a special yagna every full moon that attracts thousands. Some ask him why he worships, since he himself is the Goddess. To this he cryptically replies, "I do it for the sake of the world."

Devotion and surrender are the core of Amma's teachings. He has given his devotees a unique mantra, Aum Namo Narayani, to be repeated daily by those who want to be connected with the Goddess. Even people who do not have time for other spiritual practices can spend a few moments each day chanting the mantra, he teaches. His instruction is to not ask for anything when doing the mantra. Just surrender to Narayani's wisdom. She knows what you need, he assures. The Divine Mother knows best.

Amma's Wisdom

Excerpts from Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik's exclusive interview with Sakthi Amma

"Wisdom is the one thing that will bring peace in one's life--not money, not power, not intelligence."

"Like a mother uses sweets to assuage her child, so has Amma used gold to attract people. The Narayani Peedam had started in 1992, but the number of devotees increased tenfold after Sripuram was inaugurated. That is because of the gold. Now, how will this will lead to wisdom? Walking the Star Path to the sanctum is an experience that takes hours, and they read inspiring quotes along the way. They ponder about the wisdom, meditate on it. That wisdom will change them."

"We all know everyone will have different levels of energy at different times and different emotions. Emotions are energy and they influence all around you. Some of them connect you with your Divinity, the positive ones, such as compassion, kindness, mercy, unconditional love, beauty, wisdom, love, creation and joy. It is a divine joy that creates beauty in this world, like each flower, each fruit. When you are in touch with the Divine in you, you need not think, create or plan, the divine thought will just happen. That was how Sripuram happened, how everything happens. It does not come from the money. It is all with the sankalpa, the divine intention. In a similar way, when you understand yourself as Divinity, think about yourself as Divine, then you are part of the Divine. Amma is telling us that it is not only that Amma can do that, but you also can do great things."

"Pujas bring miracles. Puja is for the Divine, for the transcendent Paramatman. Puja is offering our love to the Divine. By honoring the Parmatman, you are loving the whole universe, and that is why Amma has not traveled much. Amma could meet five thousand or at most ten thousand people a day, but by doing puja one is taking care not just of all humans, not just of our world, but taking care of the whole universe, which itself is Paramatman.

Art and Service

Malaikodi, a sleepy village until a few years ago, has been transformed by the influx of pilgrims, enriched by new jobs, uplifted by culture and healed by Amma's medical programs. Under the sprawling branches of the Sri Narayani Peedam one finds the dual expressions of art and selfless service, two activities traditionally connected with Hindu temples.

The thrust for sponsoring art is powerfully evident throughout the complex in the form of statues and paintings. Performances of music and traditional dance are held in the Shanti Mandapam, a wide, theater-like hall. Dramatic shows are an integral part of annual festivals. Amma honors the artists with a traditional shawl, dakshina and, sometimes, by singing or playing along.

Near the Shanti Mandapam stands the Narayani Seva Hall, intended for Annadanam--feeding guests. All those who come to the Peedam and participate in the activities are provided a meal. The organization has an interesting sponsorship

program: when devotees want to perform any seva, they must pay a fee. In this way they are serving an activity and sponsoring it at the same time.

The list of social services maintained by the Narayani Peedam is long and inspiring. Shakti Amma conducts large philanthropic events in the Narayani Seva Hall, such as the donation of hundreds of bicycles, sewing machines, clothing and even artificial limbs for the impaired.

The Sri Narayani Vidyalaya school, inaugurated in June of 2000, provides education programs from kindergarten to grade 10. Over 1,000 students are guided by a full-time staff of 50. Classes are conducted in English. Besides the standard syllabus, students are also taught spirituality, with an emphasis on moral values and Hindu culture. Music, dance and other art forms are encouraged. "We also teach Sanskrit shlokas and music to our children," explains Suresh Babu, the manager of Sripuram. "They learn to chant mantras in unison for a long time. It's beautiful to hear." Parents line up anxiously at the beginning of each academic year, hoping to obtain admission for their children.

The Sri Narayani Peedam also helps children in other schools in the community. A program called Vydyanethram provides encouragement and financial support. Books and stationary are distributed, along with tables, chairs, blackboards and school uniforms. Each year, bicycles are gifted to the best students; 8,000 have been given so far.

The brightest graduates are awarded college scholarships. Subhashree, 19, a student of engineering who received a scholarship from Amma, narrates, "We came in touch with Amma's institution only last year, when I pursued a scholarship. We are not a devotee family of Amma. The annual fee of my college is around eighty thousand rupees. My family could not afford that. I am so happy that Amma is giving me this!"

Amma's organization runs dozens of other worthy programs. The Jyothi Swaroopini program provides help for smaller Hindu temples and shrines of all denominations in the state's villages and towns, supporting priests and providing puja supplies. The Arogya program conducts classes and task forces on basic health practices. The Kalyani initiative sponsors mass marriages for indigent families, taking care of all

the arrangements and the ceremony, including the feeding of the guests. Amma personally blesses the couples, who also receive basic items to set up their homes and begin their lives. The Punarjanma (rebirth) program helps prison inmates reintegrate as productive members of society, and it supports families of inmates while they are in jail.

Nature is not forgotten. Cows find solace in the Ghosala project, which rescues and provides a home for cows and male calves headed for slaughterhouses. The Sakthi Amma Afforestation Program protects endangered plants, provides education about ecology and sponsors research on sustainability. Large-scale reforestation programs are underway; 500,000 trees have been planted since 2003. To reduce its environmental impact, the Peedam runs a large-scale recycling and composting system.

Sometimes a boon comes not from a program, but from the motherly way Amma does things. For example, when faced with the proliferation of craft stalls outside Sripuram, Amma told the temple manager to let them be and benefit from the temple's abundance, with the proviso that they sell traditional handicrafts made by local village women.

The Peedam's most visible contribution to the community might be the Sri Narayani Hospital & Research Centre, a 200-bed state-of-the-art hospital inaugurated in June 2005.

The hospital provides quality medical care to those with limited or no financial resources, who have neither hope nor chance of receiving paid medical advice and treatment. Medical outreach camps are conducted to give free treatment and advice to needy villagers, virtually at their door steps. A nursing college attached to the hospital provides aspiring nurses with the necessary pre-training. Volunteer villagers receive training in health, nutrition and prevention of diseases. In total, more than 2 million patients have benefitted from the hospital and its programs.

How is all this funded? Dr. Balaji, director of the hospital, gives an example. "We had to set up a urology department. Amma asked me how much money was needed. 'You will get it,' Amma said. I soon got a call from a generous donor who gave us one crore rupees (US$225,000). Whatever Amma says or visualizes

eventually happens."

Sakthi Amma, when asked about the Peedam's amazing accomplishments of the Narayani Peedam that benefit Hinduism and the world, reveals the secret: "The ability to do great things in this world comes from the heart." Amma's heart, like his work, is overflowing even at this young age. One can hardly fathom what lies ahead of the dynamic Narayani Peedam.