

[Awards: Our Temple Builders: Hindu of the Year 2012](#)

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Awards

## Our Temple Builders: Hindu of the Year 2012 Honoring the Ancient Shilpa Parampara

For the first time, our "Hindu of the Year" is awarded to a group: the temple architects and artisans who create these masterpieces of spiritual art

We make no claim to objectivity in taking this opportunity to designate as Hindu of the Year the architects and sculptors who create the magnificent temples of our religion. Our own Iraivan Temple project--the first all-stone, hand-carved Hindu temple built in the West--has put us in intimate daily contact with the Shilpa Parampara for nearly three decades as the complex \$16-million-dollar project moves toward fruition here on our island home of Kauai, Hawaii. We know first-hand the knowledge, skill, devotion and work ethic that characterizes these artisans.

While showcasing the tradition's skills, the scale of Iraivan Temple is dwarfed by the stupendous burst of temple construction by the BAPS Swaminarayan organization, especially the Akshardham project in Delhi. BAPS has not only carried on the existing traditions of northern India, but resurrected lost arts and motifs and melded ancient methods of construction with the latest technologies to produce temples in stone at an unheard of pace--more than 1,077 in the past 41 years!

Central to the temple building tradition anywhere in India is the sthapati: architect, designer, engineer, sculptor, construction supervisor and teacher all in one. Some sthapis specialize in the making of murtis (statues), others in temple stone work and still others in the concrete, brick and plaster construction of most modern Hindu temples. Contributing sthapis are experts in metalwork, jewelry and carpentry. Many sthapis are competent engineers in reinforced concrete. Most modern temples are made of this material, then decorated by sculptors working with plaster.

But the sthapatis' skill is best showcased in the temple stonework. There is no standardized granite, sandstone or marble block to work from. Every piece is different from the moment it is cleaved from the quarry rock. Each of Iraivan Temple's several thousand stones, including its multi-ton pillars and beams, is unique. The sthapati is responsible to see that all fit together precisely. BAPS temples are similar and have been described as "giant jigsaw puzzles."

Nowadays many sthapatis in South India are trained by the Tamil Nadu Government School of Art and Architecture in Mambalapuram, but traditionally the expertise has been passed from father to son. Almost all sthapatis come from the Viswakarma caste, known by various names across India.

BAPS, for example, is collaborating closely with the Sompura community of temple artisans in Gujarat, part of this same Viswakarma tradition. Virendra Sompura was architect for the Delhi Akshardham Temple, while C.B. Sompura (whose grandfather rebuilt Somnath Temple in 1952) designed the London Shri Swaminaryana Mandir. The temple building tradition suffered greatly in North India during the long centuries of Islamic oppression, yet still survived.

We are most familiar with the prominent subgroups in South India, who avoided Islamic suppression but suffered under the British, for lack of patronage.

V. Ganapati Sthapati, based in Mambalapuram, traces his lineage through his grandfather Mahilavanam to Kunjaramalan Rajaraja Perunthachan, who designed and built the great temple of Brihadeeshwara in Tanjore in the 10th century.

Present-day sthapatis in this clan include VGS's young nephew Selvanathan, Perumal Sthapati, Shekar Sthapati (instrumental in building the huge Tiruvalluvar statue), Palanisamy Sthapati, the late Shanmugam Sthapati (who worked on Iraivan Temple) and Shanmugam's son, Santana Krishna.

Another clan is descended from Muthu Sthapathi. Now based in Kanchipuram, the family originated near Rameshwaram. Muthu had four sons, each an accomplished sthapati in his own right. The eldest, S.M. Ganapathi Sthapathi--working closely with

the youngest, Shanmugam Sthapathi--established the Sri Sankara Silpa Sala in Kanchipuram, offering temple design and construction. The late Sattanadha Sthapathi, Muthu's second son, built the Rajarajeshwari Temple on Mysore Road, Bangalore, for Shri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal of Kailash Ashram. The third son, Muthiah Sthapathi, has designed dozens of temples in the West.

One might ask then about the stone carvers themselves. Occasionally these days they are themselves from the Viswakarma caste, but more often are men drawn from the farming community.

A few years ago the US immigration service suddenly and unexpectedly stopped issuing the Religious Worker visa for carvers and plaster sculptors. Their reason? "They're just construction workers." After several months of correspondence, with the collaboration of other Hindu organizations and the help of high-priced lawyers and the office of Senator Kennedy, among others, that decision was reversed. We made a convincing case to the American government, based on scripture, history, academic research and the testimony of the shilpis themselves, that their work--however they came to it--was no ordinary job, but a religious calling, just as it is for the sthapatis. Perhaps not all approach their work with this attitude, but it is shared by everyone whom we know. For that, and for their central role in preserving and expanding Hindu culture in thousands of communities around the world, we honor our temple builders, north and south as our "Hindu of the Year" for 2012.

## The Renaissance Award: Past and Present

The Hindu Renaissance Award Hindu of the Year was created in 1990 by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of Hinduism Today, to recognize and strengthen Hindu leaders worldwide. This year, 2012, is the first time it has been presented to a group, the Shilpa Parampara, responsible for building the great temples of our religion over the last many centuries.

Previous awardees are Swami Paramananda Bharati ('90), Swami Chidananda Saraswati ('91), Swami Chinmayananda ('92), Mata Amritanandamayi Ma ('93), Swami Satchidananda ('94), Pramukhswami Maharaj ('95), Satya Sai Baba ('96), Sri Chinmoy ('97), Swami Bua ('98), Swami Chidananda Saraswati of Divine Life Society ('99), Ma Yoga Shakti ('00), T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar ('01), Dada J.P. Vaswani ('02), Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal ('03), Dr. K. Pichai Sivacharya ('04), Swami Tejomayananda ('05), Ramesh Bhai Oza ('06), Sri Balagangadharanathaswami ('07),

Swami Avdheshanand ('08), Swami Gopal Sharan Devacharya ('09), Sri P. Parameswaran ('10) and Jagadguru Sri Sri Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji ('11).

## The Viswakarma Community through the Ages

Vganapati Sthapati (1927-2011) was one of the foremost temple architects of his time, designing not only our own Iraivan Temple but spectacular works such as the Tiruvalluvar statue at Kanya Kumari. In the introduction to his seminal book, *Indian Sculpture and Iconography*, he wrote: "Indian sculpture and iconography is based on the Shilpa Shastra, an ancient text blessed by the Divinities and fostered by the hoary traditions of this land. The sculptural tradition in India, the Shilpa Parampara, is closely linked to the architectural field and the two together came to be known as the Vaastu Parampara. The designers and artists of the classical traditions of sculpture and architecture were known as the Viswakarma, whose name has been mentioned in the Vedas and the Puranas. Even today they are known by this name, though there are regional variations.

"Viswakarma craftsmen and artists have been the designers of towns, temples, residences, villages, palaces, makers of sculptural works in metal, wood, earth-mortar and stone, jewelers, vessel makers, blacksmiths and makers of implements of war. To this day this community lives in various pockets of India, though sadly depleted in number and marginalized in its contribution to society. Traditionally, all skilled work connected with buildings and sculpture came under their direct purview.

"The transference of knowledge has been hereditary, and the father's workshop became the learning ground for the son. But with the advent of modern educational patterns and technology their services were terminated in all works except temple designs and fashioning of art objects. It is only in the last two decades that a revival has taken place in the preparation and re-absorption of the traditional Viswakarma into the mainstream of social building activity.

"During the course of my research in the Shilpa Parampara, I became aware of the similarities and resemblances of the grammar, or order of sculpture, in all parts of India, whether Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa or Bengal. We realized that a national tradition existed in our midst, which had been mistakenly put into contradictory slots due to variations in styles. The underlying principles and rhythms have evolved from a common and powerful base. In fact, the work

methodology, measuring techniques, habits, ethics and material handling of the Viswakarma community show a remarkable similarity through the length and breadth of the whole of India. The Viswakarma have been one large united family, and it is their genius and creativity that has contributed greatly to the identity of our culture today."