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12th Year Reconsecration and Deity-Moving Ceremonies Are a Profound Inner Experience

It was not just another temple festival at New York's Ganesha Temple in Flushing, founded only twelve years ago. Thousands attended. Its Maha Kumbhabhishekam, celebrated jointly with Ganesha Chaturthi from August 27 through September 4, was a commemoration of heaven on earth as yet unmatched anywhere in the USA. Nine-thousand Hindus came to the seventh-day culmination of this impressive consecration ceremony performed only once in 12 years. And on the following day, 10,000 devotees joined in to celebrate Ganesha's birthday. On both days, India's finest nadaswaram musician, N. Alagusundaram (from Madurai), was featured in concert and parade.

Across the continent on America's opposite shore, the same consecration ceremony was taking place at the same time as the deity of the Palaniswami Temple in San Francisco was being moved to its new location at the Palaniswami Sivan Temple in Concord, California. Compared with New York's extravaganza, it was a humble event. Yet, such spiritual ceremonies consist of the seen and the unseen. The seen is easy to describe: singing, dancing, puja and good food. The unseen? That's another story all together. In this inward respect, both the New York and the California kumbhabhishekams were surprisingly similar.

A kumbhabhishekam is predominately an internal event. It takes place more in heaven than on earth. Each of the outer actions of the priests, such as the performance of the fire ceremony, creates an effect in the inner worlds. These inner creations are the real purpose of the worship, not the external show.

The process begins long before the people arrive. The priests who conduct the ceremonies have been carefully trained to open the doors between the inner and outer worlds through the ancient, mystical, Hindu ritual. HINDUISM TODAY talked with Bhairava Murthy, one of the six priests performing the Kumbhabhishekam at

the New York Ganesha Temple, and with Pandit Ravi Chandran, one of the five priests performing the same ceremony at California's Palaniswami Sivan Temple. Here follows their elucidation of some of the ceremonies performed and their significance.

First the yagasala (separate sacred place) was constructed near the temple for the purpose of invoking Agni, the fire God. Here, according to Vedic instruction, nine homa kundas (fire pits) were established corresponding to nine Deities: Ganesha, Muruga, Siva, Shakti, Agni and four Dik Palakas (Deities of protection). This process is referred to as Agni Sthapana (the preparation or the coming of the Fire God).

Then kalasasthapana (positioning of pots) was performed. In New York, this was a unique feature. In an unusually extravagant endeavor, 366 kalasas (sacred decorated kumbas or pots) were placed in the yagasala, arranged in nine expanding, concentric circles. The entire arrangement took the form of a massive Siva Lingam.

The mystical purpose of these ceremonies is to actually create an ethereal form for the Deity to use. The pradana kumbas kalas (main kalasas) were decorated with sandalwood paste (representing the body of the deity) and multi-colored strings (representing the nerve currents of the deity). A white cord was tied from the main homa to the head kumba. A silver cord was tied from the head kumba to the crown chakra of the temple Deity. Through these cords the Divine power would be transferred from the flame of the homa to the temple deity.

After the yagasala had been created and the kalasas were in place, the Gods and devas were pleased to allow the ceremonies to begin with the Agni Karyam (the first ceremony of fire), performed by lighting the first homa and sacrificing dravya (herbs) into it. Then, Agni was invoked through the sacred flame with ritual mantrams (chants) and mudras (gestures). During this time, a giant, etheric form of God was actually being created by the priests in the flames of the homa to serve as a vehicle for His Divine power and Being. All the while an ascending spiritual force was constantly being transferred off into the kumbas and temple Deities through the white and silver cords. Finally, the Kumbhabhishekam was performed, when the water from the head kumba was ceremoniously poured over the temple deity and the vimana (top of the Gopuram, or temple tower) to the thundering shrill of nadaswaram and tavil.

In New York, Jinorth Tharana was performed in addition to the usual kumbhabhishekam. Jinorth Tharana consists of a collection of ceremonies done to consecrate a number of small repairs made recently in the temple. It is traditional for a large temple to hold small temple repairs in abeyance so that their execution will coincide with the Kumbhabhishekam. The two ceremonies are then performed as one.