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Years of Bigoted Opposition Finally Overcome by Small Hindu Community

Lord Siva was busy last February 12th - Maha Sivaratri, the most auspicious festival day in His honor. On this exact date in England He won a court decision returning a stolen icon of Him to its rightful South Indian temple, and in Australia He won government approval for His temple to be built in the Sydney suburb of Campbelltown.

The England court case [HINDUISM TODAY, May, 1990] was a subdued and cerebral affair compared to the town council scene in Australia. Rowdy temple opponents threw punches when ejected by police. Supporting council members required armed escort past a hundred local residents enraged at the council's narrow seven-to-six approval of the Hindu temple.

There was a poignant incident at the following week's council meeting which dismissed a last-ditch parliamentary maneuver to overturn the decision. One Hindu lady (originally from Andhra Pradesh and now living in Macquarie Fields) came who had heard about the meeting on television. Not particularly aware of the rancor, she sat near the opposing residents. One of these, who had been taking notes, got up and said, "I am a journalist and I am going to write how horrible Hindus are!" The Hindu lady said in tears, "Why do you say that? What have we done?" The resident replied laughingly and mocked her accent, "Speak in English!" Our reporter at the meeting tried to console the now greatly distressed lady. She told him that she had a young son who had never seen a temple, and she wanted her children to have the opportunity to follow their heritage and culture here in Australia, where they lived.

It was just such concerns that prompted the area's Hindu families - numbering 200

adults and 180 children, all permanently settled in Australia - to decide to build a temple. Local resident and well-known architect Prem Misra was commissioned to design the work and pursue the necessary permits. Hostile resistance from local citizens was instantaneous. The first site selected was rejected by the city council because of "opposition by residents, noise and traffic" even though there are other churches in the area, some newly built. A Baptist Church is just 1,500 feet away from the site. The aldermen suggested Misra build the temple on a rural block - a suggestion which led to the present site. Antipathy from residents only became more vigorous and support from opposing councilmen was not forthcoming.

In interviews with HINDUISM TODAY rival councilmen Jim Merry, Richard Cerveny and Gordon Fetterplace all insisted their opposition was on planning considerations only - that the area in question had been designated as "scenic protection" and not appropriate for a place of worship. But religious prejudice could easily be inferred from remarks such as Merry's statement at a council meeting that the area would be overrun with Hindus and there would be "enclaves and ghettos." An area resident speaking at the council meeting said, "The only reason they're moving in our area is to get in and get our homes cheap." Opponents in the public gallery (later ejected by police) shouted "Go back home" to the Hindus. Residents also cleverly focused on a casual comment by Misra that the temple might be a "tourist attraction" to claim it wasn't a religious development at all but a commercial enterprise about to bring bus-loads of tourists.

A Catholic Franciscan monk, Friar Peter Confeggi, convened a meeting of local Christian leaders who listened respectfully to a presentation by the Hindus, but ultimately refused to issue a statement in their support. Appeals to the World Council of Churches by HINDUISM TODAY resulted in sympathetic responses, but no concrete action or strong statements. The national Australian Council of Churches said in a letter to our Malaysia Editor, Pathmarajah Nagalingam, that they are "concerned at what appears to be a violation of people's right to public worship" and a promise "to seek intervention by the Federal authorities in defense of minority rights" if all legal appeals failed. The Christian's muted reaction was in stark contrast to the international pressure applied by them against Nepal last year in efforts to assure similar rights for Christians in that 97% Hindu country. Australian evangelists had even managed to endanger Australia's foreign aid to Nepal if their desires were not met by the impoverished Himalayan country.

A Catholic church is planned for the same area of Campbelltown just a short distance from the temple and in the same scenic protection zoning. Not a single protest has been raised against it by residents or the council members so

vehemently protecting the zoning regulations. Consequently, it was approved by the Campbelltown Council.

The temple's difficulties have taken place against a larger pattern of racial discrimination. The "National Inquiry into Racist Violence" ordered by the Australian government and presented to parliament on April 18th concluded, "Evidence to the Inquiry overwhelmingly demonstrated that racist attitudes and practices, both conscious and unconscious, pervade our institutions." The native Aborigines are the most seriously oppressed, according to the report.

Late in 1990 a report of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales analyzed the difficulties of minority religious groups securing sites for places of worship. In one case, Strathfield City Council had refused an application to build a Buddhist monastery after receiving a 273-signature petition against the development and an 840-signature petition supporting it. The council refused the application on the basis the monastery was too big, out of character with the area and "not in the public interest" - grounds which the Land and Environment Court later rejected.

Labor party members of the council led by Mayor Jim Kremmer supported the Hindu's right to a place of worship and their votes ultimately carried the day.

With permit in hand, the temple society is rapidly moving to start construction. The land sale is expected to close in June and fundraising is accelerating. Bhoomi Puja (ground-blessing ceremony) is scheduled for April 28th and will be sanctified with the presence of Swami Chidananda Saraswati (Muniji) and Rameshbhai Oza.

The Campbelltown Hindu temple is planned to be an entirely underground artificial cave. Several famous Hindu temples are in caves - Badami's four cave temples and the Elephanta Siva temple both near Bombay, Tirupparankunram and Rock Port temple in South India, and Ellora in Hyderabad. The temple is for Shiva and Shakti (Parvati). The shape will be elliptical, created through low-profile arches of precast concrete, and built to accommodate 230 worshippers.

Architect Prem Misra is an leading advocate of underground constructions - one of his buried houses in Australia is world famous. He cites some of the numerous advantages: "The main benefit of earth-covered buildings is that the ground surface remains open [retaining] the site's rural characteristics. There is complete noise reduction compared with above-ground buildings. The earth keeps the building at a constant temperature so it need be neither heated nor cooled. We do not have to worry about expensive exterior artwork or carvings. There is no roof or walls to maintain. It is many, many times stronger than above-ground construction."

But Misra, an underground proselytizer in the true sense of the term, doesn't stop with such worldly considerations. He goes right to scripture to support his building methods: "Our ultimate goal in this human form is to attain Self-Realization and liberation from re-birth. A cave-shaped temple sitting deep into the ground connotes the Atman seated deep into the cave of intellect. The Upanishads state. "In the cave of the intellect is the heart, and in the heart the Atman is apprehended. He who enters the cave through meditation and comes to apprehend that he himself is the pure consciousness, to him there is no re-entry into a fresh body."

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