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TEMPLES

Siva in the South

Atlanta Hindu Temple adds God Siva to its pantheon with His own temple

Surrounded by pine trees and sitting atop a hillock creatively landscaped in Vaishnava symbols, situated next to a state highway allowing darshan to all who drive by, the Hindu Temple of Atlanta, Georgia, stands out as one of the most beautiful temples in North America. In a grand week of ceremonies in late May, local devotees and priests from temples all across the continent performed the first twelve-year rededication ceremony, kumbhabhishekam, for the Lord Venkateswara (Vishnu) temple plus dedicated a newly built temple to God Siva. It is believed to be the first community in America to build a completely separate Siva temple of equal size on the same land as another temple.

In 2001, eleven years after the Venkateswara temple was established, the trustees bought six acres of adjoining land. In recognition of the increasing number of Siva devotees in the Atlanta area, they drew up plans for a Siva temple on the new land. They hired Sri Muthiah Sthapati, a traditional temple architect from India who designed and oversaw the construction of the Venkateswara temple, as well as many others in North America. By May, 2003, Sthapati completed the Siva temple plans. Ground-breaking ceremonies were conducted the same month, and construction began in January, 2004. The main structure of the building was completed in a few months, and the dedication scheduled to coincide with the rededication of the Venkateswara temple from May 25 to 29.

Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, attended as chief guest. He gave daily talks through the week, emphasizing the necessity and metaphysics of temple worship. Bodhinatha explained that communicating with the Gods through worship of the image is a very real thing. But we are worshiping God, not the image as such.

The principal Deity of the new temple is Lord Siva in the form of a Sivalingam. The Lingam was given the name of Ramalingeswara by Sri Jayendra Saraswati of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham in South India. This particular Lingam is a naturally formed stone from the Narmada River in India. This rounded, elliptical, aniconic image is the simplest and most ancient symbol of Siva, especially of Parasiva, God beyond all forms and qualities.

According to temple priest Pandit Kumar, the Sivalingam, along with the icons of Goddess Parvati, Lord Ganapati and Lord Subrahmanya were kept in the Venkateswara temple where they rested in water, milk and flowers for five days to purify, soften and heal any hurts that may have occurred during the sculpting process. During these days, homas, fire worship ceremonies, were conducted each morning and evening in the ritual tent just outside the temple. The purpose of the complex rituals is to invoke God first into the fires and the kumbhas (pots) of water, and then magically transfer this power to the icons themselves during installation in the temple. On the morning of May 29, the American Memorial Day holiday, the new temple came alive as the Sivalingam and other Deities were installed in their sanctums in the ritual called prana pratishthapana.

Fund-raising for the Siva temple began two years ago as devotees sponsored the special Ganesha puja held once a month. Cultural programs successfully raised funds, including two sold-out performances by the renowned dancer Venupathi Satyam. Building the Siva temple next to the existing Vishnu temple allowed for collaboration and sharing of resources already existing at the Vishnu temple, according to temple trustee Dr. Vauseda Kulkarni. Contractors built on the experiences and lessons gained when the Vishnu temple was built more than a decade earlier.

The Lord Venkateswara temple was dedicated when just the plain concrete and wooden structure was finished. Later came the process of "Indianization," in which highly decorative plaster relief work was applied to just about every surface inside and out. The Siva temple followed the same route, with the elaborate decorations on the edifice to take an additional two years and be performed by ten artisans from India. They will include depiction of the 108 tandava dance poses of Lord Siva.

The Vishnu temple www.hindutempleofatlanta.org was conceived back in the 1970s with a group of like-minded Hindus pledging us\$10,000 each to the project, according to temple president Dr. G.V. Raghu. Ground was broken in 1986, and the

main Deities were installed in 1992. The temple has since added land and buildings. The most recent addition, before the Siva temple, was a combined education/banquet hall dedicated in 2003. It is designed to accommodate the active children's classes in religion, language, music, dance and yoga.

Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami commented that the Hindu Temple of Atlanta is the first temple society in North America to build a separate Siva temple of the same size as its existing Vishnu temple. Up until now, some Hindu communities have placed Siva and Vishnu in the same building with equal size shrines. These Siva/Vishnu temples being built outside of India (he was unaware of any in India) are a new innovation within Hinduism. Traditionally, Hindu temples have a single main sanctum for the temple's main Deity, and smaller, subsidiary shrines for other Gods and Goddesses.

According to Hindu philosophy, Siva and Vishnu are different depictions of the one Supreme God (see page 30 for several swamis' observations on this point). So, Bodhinatha points out, when the two forms are put in two separate and equal central sanctums, it is like splitting the one God into two Gods, which can create confusion about the nature of God and cause Hinduism to be perceived as polytheistic. A more basic problem is that conflicts often arise between the different priest lineages in such a mixed circumstance. The Atlanta arrangement allows the shrines, ceremonies and priesthoods in each temple to be solely of Vaishnavite or Saivite tradition, providing each group of devotees the forms of worship to which they are accustomed.

Today the paired temples stand on twelve acres of land with complete facilities for the practice and perpetuation of Hinduism, setting an excellent example for new temples coming up in the West. With its proximity to a major airline hub, a plethora of hotels (at least one of which provides shuttle service to the temple) and other Atlanta attractions, this oasis of traditional Hinduism could become one of Hinduism's premier pilgrimage spots in America.