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2,000 Attend Grand Consecration Rites of America's First Major Shakti Temple

On July 27th the final consecration rituals, known as the Maha Kumbabhishekam, were performed for the opening of the Sri Meenakshi Temple of Houston, Texas, now America's largest Hindu temple and its first Shakti temple. That day was declared "Meenakshi Temple Day," by the Mayor of the town of Pearland, the honorable Tom Reid. The event signaled the completion of the main temple building, including the shrines and sanctums - Phase II of a four-phase plan of prodigious proportions that began in 1977, when the founding members first met and discussed the idea of building such a temple. It also marked the end of seven full days of elaborate rituals, which included the installation of deities and yantras in their sanctums. Among the grandest that this country has yet seen of the glorious pageantry of Hinduism, these rites were performed by six highly skilled priests, three from India and one from each of the three cities of Pittsburgh, New York and New Orleans. The priests from India were flown in especially for the performance of these rituals. The Jagadguru Sri Shankaracharya of Kanchi Kamakoti Peetam selected the auspicious date and time for the crucial ceremony, according to precise astrological calculations.

The consecration and inauguration of a new temple or re-consecration of an existing one is an event of grand proportions and tremendous importance. Traditionally, it is considered a great and rare blessing to be present at a kumbabhishekam, though its rarity is now being challenged with the flurry of temples coming up around the world. This ceremony has the effect of announcing to the inner worlds that the temple is finished, saying, as it were, "Oh Gods and divine beings of the inner worlds! We have built a house for you, a vehicle for your unseen work. Please come and take up residence in it. Our physical work is complete, and our priests have purified the inner atmosphere with all of the holy and sacred rituals at their command. We offer you our love, our devotions and gifts of precious substances. Please make this your home and bless and uplift us and our children and the generations to come!"

The pre-Kumbabhishekam activities, held from June 18 to June 20, consisted of the performance of homam rituals and other special pujas, which each day lasted from 3 to 6 hours. At the homams, or yagna, rituals, the priests sat before the sacred fire and placed offerings of fruits, special woods, spices, glowers, ghee and other refined substances into the flames and chanted the Vedas, thousands-of-years-old slokas of Sanskrit, invoking the Gods and devas. These homams included the Sri Mahaganapathi Homam, the Navagraha Homam and Nakshtra Homam; and the Rudra Ekadasini Yagna, which included Rudra japam, puja and Vasordhara Homam. During the afternoon on these and the following days, various bhajan groups from the Houston area sang devotional songs, including the Shree Satya Sai Society, the Gujarathi Samaj of Houston, the Houston Marathi Mandal, the Hindu Worship Society, the Hindu Temple Society of Greater Houston, the Hindu Temple Society of Texas and others.

Of primary importance and closely connected to the homam rituals is the blessing of the water that is used in the very peak moment of the kumbabhishekam to bathe the spires at the top of each sanctum on the outside of the temple.

On June 23rd the Kumbabhishekam ceremonies themselves were begun at 7:00 a.m. with the Sri Vighneswara Puja, the Sri Maha Ganapati Homam and other special rites. These lasted until 11:00 a.m., and more pujas and homams were performed that evening. On the 24th and 25th the rituals continued, and by the 26th, approximately 14 separate homams had been performed, and over 15 major special pujas. On the morning of the 26th, the temple's yantras and vighrahas (images of the Deities) were ceremoniously installed in the sanctum sanctorums. This major part of the consecration was called the "Yantra and Devata Prathishtai Ashtabhandhanam," a ritual presided over by the Sri Kanchi Kamakoti Peeta Sivaagamani, a most highly qualified priest from South India.

Mr. G. Subramanyam explains in the Souvenir produced by the Sri Meenakshi Temple Society that "...Ashtabhandhana - the installation of the Deity in the sanctum sanctorum - takes place whenever a new vighraha of the Deity is installed or a major renovation takes place. The vighraha is fixed on a pedestal using a special adhesive made out of eight herbal ingredients. This adhesive is prepared by a select few religious leaders in India, who alone know the formula. Gold and copper plate with inscriptions of yantras and mantras is set on the pedestal, over which the vighraha is placed and secured with the adhesive."

The yantra is a matrix of esoteric inscriptions engraved on a thin sheet of gold or copper, which marks for the inner world beings the locus of the temple. Occult authorities explain that the yantra appears in the second world in a larger form, and its inscriptions polarize and magnetize specific types of blessings from the Gods. It denotes, in a sense, a unique code or blueprint. Thus, we find that temples with similarly inscribed yantras have similar vibrations. Each major temple deity has its own special yantra, installed inside its sanctum. The yantra is a very important and vital element of every temple and is found even in sanctums which house no physical image of the Deity, such as the sacred Rahasyam sanctum of Chidambaram Temple, South India.

It was on the morning of the 27th that the kumbabhishekam itself was performed - the bathing of the kumbams, the spires at the top of each major sanctum. This dramatic finale of days of ritual was performed simultaneously by three teams of priests standing on scaffolding above roof level around the three ornate vimanas, silhouetted against the sky. This was then followed by the inaugural mahabhishekams and pujas to each of the deities inside the temple, and special pujas were offered for sponsorship to the devotees.

Over 2,000 people attended on this final day. The guests of honor were Mr. N. Krishnan, Indian Ambassador to the United Nations, Mrs. Krishnan, and Professor S. V. Chittababu, Vice Chancellor of Annamalai University. The event received the attention and blessings of a dozen or more dignitaries and many spiritual leaders, as published in the souvenir commemorating the auspicious occasion. Spiritual leaders present at the kumbabhishekam were Swami Chinmayananda, and His Holiness Sivaya Subramuniaswami, accompanied by one swami disciple, Siva Ceyonswami. Also present were Maha Mandaleswari and another female swami from the Sri Sankracharya organization in Pennsylvania.

The History of the Temple

The following section is reprinted, in part, from "A Word From the Board of Trustees," from the Meenakshi Temple Society's Souvenir of the kumbabhishekam. It provides an excellent summary of the temple's growth, from a mental concept, to brick and cement.

"It was a bright October Sunday morning in 1977 when a group of some 30 Hindu families made a covenant with the Gods that they shall build a Sakti (Sri Meenakshi) temple in Houston to meet the religious and spiritual need of the present and future generations of Hindus in this country. A steering committee of those present was set up to initiate the necessary organizational procedures to pursue this objective. A constitution was written, a Board of Trustees was elected, and Sri Meenakshi Temple Society was officially launched in early 1978. Within a few weeks IRS [U.S. Internal Revenue Service] granted tax-exempt status to MTS.

"Several open-ended committees were set up in order to decentralize the society's operations and to permit maximum participation by the community. These committees were to plan, organize and implement such responsibilities as site selection, fund raising, newsletter cultural programs, landscaping, architectural and structural designs, construction, etc. Response from the community to work on these communities was simply overwhelming. Donations started trickling in slowly but steadily, and Phase I, which included the purchase of land and the construction of Sri Ganesh Temple, began. A five-acre land was purchased in Pearland, Texas, in May, 1978. Temple architect Sthapathi S.M. Ganapathy, along with Mr. Purushottam Naidu (both of the Andhra Pradesh Government, India) visited the temple site and prepared the architectural blueprints. The Ganesh Temple was built, and the installation and kumbabhishekam festivities were conducted in the month of August, 1979. Dr. K. Ramaswami performed the weekend and special pujas, and, through his coordination, volunteer families did the pujas during weekdays. With the arrival of Mr. M. Parthasarathy and his wife, pujas have been performed daily, and the temple has been kept open every day.

"With the completion of the Ganesh Temple, preparations for Phase II, which included the construction of the main temple for Sri Meenakshi; Sri Sundareswara and Sri Venkateswara, gathered momentum. Donations flowed in increasing numbers, from all over the country and from abroad. Three artisans from New York and seven from India were brought in to design and construct the main temple. Sthapathi Muthiah of Tamilnadu, India, with the assistance of Madhavachari, has provided the leadership in the construction of the sanctums for the main deities. A loan of \$200,000 from the State Bank of India, New York, was negotiated with a view to expedite completion of Phase II before the end of Uttarayana 1982..."

With the creation of the Ganesh Temple, a simple, 8 by 8-foot brick structure, the project was off to a stable start, for the worship had begun. As several of the ladies of the community remarked to Sri Subramuniaswami during his visit to the temple on the day of the kumbabhishekam, Lord Ganesha had done his work in clearing

the obstacles for the momentous task of building this grand temple, paving the way for the coming of His Father/Mother - Siva/Sakti.

India-West states that the first phase of the temple, "...covering the Ganesh Temple, was completed at a cost of \$117,000. Phase II, the main temple, is estimated to cost \$300,000...Contributions from devotees in the U.S. and overseas are generous, and total about \$157,000." Fund-raising efforts are, of course, continuing, and a complete range of pujas, archanas and abhishekams are offered, which will also bring in a steady income.

Further Work - Phase III and IV

As stated in the Trustees' letter in the Souvenir, Phase I and II of the temple construction are complete, but two more phases are to come before the temple's master plan is fulfilled. The main structure is in operation, serving the community just as the small Ganesh Temple did before it, though on a smaller scale; and next, around this thriving structure is in operation, serving the community just as the small Ganesh Temple did before it, though on a smaller scale; and next, around this thriving structure, will begin the construction of the outer prakarams and the rajagopuram, the priest and guest quarters, a cultural and educational complex and, finally, beautification through landscaping. The goal for completion of these two grand phases of work is 1985.

Putting it in Perspective

In comparison to the Meenakshi temple, there are in many major cities of the U.S. where Hindus live numerous smaller and/or less formal temples, shrines and places of worship; and Saiva Siddhanta Church has build a large, formal Siva temple on Kauai. Of its formality and size, however, the Meenakshi Temple of Houston is the third major Hindu temple to be built in the U.S. by the Indian people. The first was the Sri Venkateswara Temple of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, and the second was the Maha Ganapathi Temple of Flushing, New York. More than 2,000 miles separate these two east-coast temples from Houston, but in a very real sense, the efforts to build these first two temples helped to build the third. Meenakshi Temple is thus not only a monument of religion and culture, it is a testimony, as well, to the growing spirit of unity, dedication and cooperation among the Indian people in

America. In the Souvenir of the Kumbabhishekam, the Trustees offer their thanks to a host of individuals, organizations and government agencies for their service to the cause of Meenakshi Temple. They thank especially the Ganesha Temple of New York and the Hindu Temple Society of North America, and name in particular the efforts of Mr. C.V. Narasimhan and MR. A. Alagappan, officers of those two organizations who, having played major roles in the arduous task of building the New York Temple, and the subsequent task of establishing its regular operation, were able to help Houston avert some of the possible pitfalls. Of the project's extensive moral, advisory and financial support received, a considerable portion came from India. An important link was set up with the Madurai Meenakshi Temple by Chairman of the Board of Trustees of that temple, Mr. V.N.CT. Chidambaram. The Sri Venkateswara Deity was sculpted and donated by Mr. Prasad of Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam. Bharathiya International Trust coordinated Indian efforts to help the temple. The Honorable Minister M.B. Ramachandran and the Government of Tamil Nadu helped the temple obtain free books and tapes for its library. The Chief Minister and the Government of Andhra Pradesh provided the services of Sthapathi Ganapathi. The Ministry of Civil Aviation, Government of India, and Air India, sanctioned the free transportation of the vigrahas. A Hindu temple clearly requires the gathering of countless elements of material, knowledge and skill and the proper people. The necessary network of intelligent minds to facilitate these requirements became available to the Meenakshi Temple Society, and, on an international level.

In the Souvenir is found ample evidence too of the support and good wishes from U.S. government leaders for the success of the Meenakshi Temple and the Indian community, including letters from the The White House Office of Special Presidential Messages, Texas Governor William P. Clements Jr.; Congressman Mickey Leland from the 18th District, Texas; County Judge, E.E. Brewer, and Mayor Reid of Pearland. Also, as has become evident from the response among the American people in general to such presentations of Indian art, culture and religion as "Manifestations of Shiva," and the openness to the Hindu religious teachers and spiritual leaders who have been coming to the West for the past several decades (teaching, primarily, yoga), America is open and receptive to Hindu Temples and the Hindu culture, and to other Indian cultures as well. America has always shown a great tolerance for all sincere religious faiths. The Maha Ganapathi Temple in Flushing, New York, for example, has been widely accepted by the non-Indian population, and is considered a fine asset to the community.

More About the Temple

Meenakshi Temple of Houston is approximately 25 miles from downtown Houston, a fast growing techno-industrial, cosmopolitan metropolis. There are an estimates 10,000 Indian families in the Houston area, and it is to begin serving the needs of these that the temple was conceived.

The temple is an ornate structure in traditional Dravidian temple architectural style, made primarily of cement block and the shrines of brick and mortar. The temple faces East and has three major sanctums. The central sanctum houses the Goddess Meenakshi. If one stands facing Sri Meenakshi, to the right is the sanctum of Lord Venkateswara (Lord Vishnu), and to the left Sri Sundareswara (Lord Siva), represented by a beautiful Siva Lingam. Outside this Siva sanctum, to the left, is a Ganesha shrine. Already, the temple has a very powerful vibration.

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