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Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami, our Hindu of the Year, dedicates a mammoth new temple in Karnataka, South India

By Choodie Sivaram, Bengaluru

Built on the picturesque adi-chunchanagiri hills, 110 kilometers from Bangalore, the us$21 million Lord Kalabhairava temple is an impressive granite structure 14 years in the making, with over a hundred sculptors and thousands of laborers involved. The equal of many great temples of India, though not quite complete, it was consecrated in mid-February, 2008.

The temple was built by Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami, revered spiritual guru of Karnataka, for his favorite Deity, Kalabhairava, a form of Lord Siva. It is located at the ancient Adichunchanagiri monastery, an ancient matha of the Natha Sampradaya. Situated deep in the arid hills of Karnataka State, the monastery's many buildings cling to the massive rock outcropping that overlooks the plains below. Established 1,500 years ago, the huge edifice, with its rock caves, meandering corridors, Sanskrit college and first-rate guest facilities, has become the region's spiritual hub, and a powerful social force as well. Swamiji is the monastery's 71st pontiff.

Bhairava literally means "terrifying." As Kalabhairava, "Terrifying Lord of Time," He oversees the march of time. Adi Shankaracharya wrote that Kalabhairava indicates kalakalam, "death to death" and bhuktimuktidayakam, one who gives worldly happiness as well as liberation. This is the form of Siva as the fiery protector. He carries and is represented by the trident, an implement often enshrined as guardian at the entrance to Siva temples. Lord Bhairava's mount is a dog. The new temple is unique in being the first major sanctuary at which Kalabhairava is enshrined as the main Deity.

The dedication ceremony

When I arrived on the evening of February 16, the day before the consecration of the temple towers and the Deity, the whole area was engulfed in festivities. Competing with the fanfare of human chatter, vehicles horns and police whistles was the loud and resonant chanting of Vedic hymns by 50 pundits. Homas and yajnas with Ganesha, Shanmukha, Siva and Parvati invoked into 1,008 kalasas, decorated water pots, were underway at the yagasala, a temporary ceremonial area erected outside the new temple. These fire rituals, called yajna, were to stretch through the day into the evening and late night, concurrent with other consecration rites.

That morning, the priests had all paraded from the yagasala to the temple, carrying their ritual implements for blessings. Then they walked back to conduct the day's chanting. The forty-by-forty foot yagasala held the usual complement of homa pits, some round, some square, some triangular or eight-sided. At each such offering place, designed to mimic the form of the cosmos, a team of five or eight priests presided, offering their chants into the sacred fire to build the spiritual edifice that would inhabit the physical temple nearby. Nearby, forty swamis, mostly of the Natha Sampradaya, sat in silent conclave, gathered around Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami. Natha sannyasins are known for their massive earrings, and these orange-robed monks were adorned with a two- to four-inch ring of bone or metal pierced through the cartilage of both ears.

Later, musicians and dancers ushered the swamis to the homa platform, surrounded by the surging crowd of guests, locals, villagers, streams of sadhus and attention-seeking politicians--it was chaotic! The purnahuti, the final ritual pouring of ghee into the sacred fire, was performed in the presence of Balagangadharanatha Swami late in the evening.

Now it is past midnight and all is quiet. I venture into the new temple, knowing that tomorrow it will be impossibly crowded. Four majestic Chola-style gopurams, entrance towers, beckon us. Three are 57 feet tall; the main east entrance looms 100 feet into the sky.

The grandly impressive 172 granite pillars display superb craftsmanship. Into their

faces are carved the 64 forms of Bhairava, each 4.5 feet in height. Twelve hundred skilled artisans from all over India have labored over the past 14 years to produce this traditional marvel, under the able stewardship of Muthiah Sthapati, a traditional temple architect from Tamil Nadu.

Sthapati flew in to personally guide the final days' events. On February 16, two dozen priests joined him in installing a four-foot Shakti murti in a side shrine, and in enlivening Kalabhairava's vahana, a graceful dog that looks down a gauntlet of eight eight-foot-tall black granite murtis that guard the entrance to the sanctum of their Lord. Nearby, workers were frantically completing the floor and preparing to install the flagpole, or dvajasthambam. They worked all night to complete these preparations, finishing just in time for the dawn ceremonies.

Devotees stream into the area even at this late hour. They come from all over Karnataka, neighboring Andhra, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Kalabhairava is the family Deity to millions. There's a feeling of pride and joy among the devotees as they step into this grand new temple for their Lord.

The administration has a daunting task to provide the visitors with accommodation, food and information. The celebrations, which began on February 11 and continued for 22 days, were packed with pujas, homas and cultural activities. Each day more than 100,000 people congregated here.

"Sahasrachandi Homa is being performed every day for one month," explains Shekarswamy, spokesperson and chief administrator of the Matha and BGS Group of Institutions. "Athirudra Mahayaga, which is rare and elaborate, is also being performed. This yajna needs about four hundred ritviks (Vedic Pundits), and they have been brought from all over India," Besides rituals, cultural and literary activities were scheduled at a marathon pace. Hundreds of performers of classical arts presented a variety of cultural programs, including a day of poetry. A Dharma Sammelan brought together over 40 religious heads for three days to discuss key religious issues.

On February 17, Swamiji's 64th birthday, various homas as prescribed by the Agamas commenced at 5:30am and concluded at eight with the purnahuti ghee offering. At 9:10pm, the chosen auspicious moment, Mahakumbhabhisekam (ritual

ablution)of the Rajagopuram, entrance tower, and Vimanagopuram, central tower, were performed (photos, page 28-29). amidst Vedic chanting, temple drums and horns, and the clamor of the thousands of devotees witnessing the historic blessing.

Focus now moved to the main shrine inside the temple. There was no restraining the crowds; the event and celebration that belonged to them all. Only a small portion were lucky enough to make it into the temple to witness the Kumbhabhisekham of the finely chiseled 10.5 feet tall main Deity, Kalabhairava, and other accompanying Deities. Even for those inside the temple, it was not easy to see inside the sanctum. As specified in Agamic tradition, nine gems were placed under the Deity as part of the consecration rituals. After worship amidst Vedic chanting, the Deity was bathed with 108 pots of spiritually charged milk. The presence of the holy monks further heightened the spiritual atmosphere.

Back and forth the crowd moved, between the yagasala and the temple. It was an ancient scene--devotees vying for a glimpse of the Lord or the chance to touch the swamis' feet, even for an instant. In the midst of all this, the taciturn founder of the temple reigned with a powerful presence that belied his quietude. A guru to millions, and having built 27 formidable institutions, he yet remains uncannily humble and unassuming. It reminded me of the saying of Yogaswami: "The hen lays one egg and cackles endlessly. The turtle lays 1,000 eggs and remains silent. Be like the turtle, not like the hen."

The day concluded with Swamiji's birthday celebrations, attended by a plethora of dignitaries: sadhus, politicians, academicians and other people of importance. The staff and pundits of the ashram showered the pontiff with bushels of flowers of all kinds.

For centuries, Adichunchanagiri Matha has maintained a small shrine for Kalabhairava. With the construction of this huge temple, Swamiji has ensured that the Deity will be central to each devotee' pilgrim's experience at this ancient monastery. PIpi

In Swami's Own Words

Hinduism Today: What inspired you to build this temple?

Adichunchangiri is a Panchalinga Kshetra that follows the Saiva Siddhanta lineage under the Natha Sampradaya. Its existing Kalabhairava temple was a small one. I prayed to Him and started with a grand plan for the first major temple in India with Bhairava as the main Deity. The beauty, energy and vibration here is unique. This temple that will live on for centuries.

What temple renovation work are you engaged in and why?

A temple is a place of importance to people. Going to the temple, celebrating our festivals, hosting the annual temple festival, all this leads to increased spirituality, which is essential for the well being of people. This can happen only if there is an attraction to the temple. If a temple is dilapidated, no one will go. This is the reason we are taking up renovation of temples. When we started building this temple, neighboring villagers asked us to renovate the temples in their villages. When I went to Ujjain six years back, I found that the Mahakaleshwar temple there, which was constructed in the period of Raja Vikramaditya and is one among the 12 Jyotir Lingas, was in a dilapidated condition. I sought the permission of the government and had it renovated.

What are your programs for reconversion to Hinduism?

We have throughout schools, colleges and hospitals addressed the need for education and health care among hundreds of thousands of villagers. It is now time to focus on spirituality and to bring people into the fold of bhakti. It is just not about building or renovating temples. We have taken up the task of bringing people who have converted into other religions, especially Christianity, back into the fold of Hinduism. They have left--with or without reason--and they became outsiders to both religions. They may have been deceived by society, by their own family or their trusted ones. People may have abandoned them; maybe it was poverty. We are making them realize that leaving the religion was not the answer; finding solutions to their problems is the answer.

What is lacking in us Hindus?

We have to have pride in ourselves. We should not feel low about ourselves economically, in education or by caste. We should feel we are equal to all. Our Vedas have always spoken of these values: "Aham Brahmasmi, tattvam asi." "God is in me." This is not an attitude of arrogance, but of deep understanding.

What are your thoughts about technology and youth today?

Technology has brought negative effects on our children. They don't know how to mingle with people, how to respect elders, how to relate to those around them, how to see the world. They have developed a kind of laziness and lethargy. The material world is all that they know. They are moving away from Divinity and not connecting to the superconscious, which is the ultimate. Technology also has a shelf life, what after that? The joy that spirituality brings is unknown to many.