

## [Shakti Devotees Establish Ashram In California](#)

Category : [September 1985](#)

Published by Anonymous on Sep. 01, 1985

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In January of this year a small group of Shakti devotees arrived in Northern California to found a Shakti Temple and ashram on a 10-acre parcel of land in the hills of Moraga. The ashram and temple, established in an existing building, has 12 residents, both single and married, several of whom work in the world to support it.

The "Temple of the Divine Mother" houses three Shakti Deities - Maha Lakshmi, Maha Kali and Maha Saraswati - made, as is traditional, out of clay and straw. There is also a Siva Lingam and an outdoor havan (fire pit) where rituals are conducted every Sunday from 8 to 11:30 A.M. The ashram residents are building a portable havan as well, for they hope to conduct homas by invitation throughout the area. Daily activities of the ashram, open to all Hindus (and people of all other faiths), include the 5 A.M. arati, recitation from the Durga Sapta Shati, Hanuman Chalisa and Guru Gita, as well as hatha yoga and evening satsang. All the holy days of the Vikramic calendar are duly observed at the shrine.

The twin inspiration behind the temple stems from Swami Satyananda Saraswati and a lady devotee of Shakti known simply as "Ma." Swami Satyananda is an American by birth who lived as a sadhu in forest retreats in India for years, much of the time spent in performing lengthy pujas. After mastering Sanskrit, Bengali and Hindi, he studied the Vedas for seven years and the Shakta Tantras another five. These 12 years of study and meditation led to sannyas diksha from his Guru, Swami Amritananda Saraswati.

Ma grew up in a small town in Assam, India, near a well-known Shakti temple. From the time she was a small child she began hearing instructions from God and following them. After a time others began coming to her for advice and instruction, and she eventually established an ashram of her own.

They first met five years ago in Assam, at Swami Saraswati's small ashram and temple. He was engaged in a discipline of 108 consecutive days of prayer and worship, having vowed to not leave his hermitage for the duration. One morning, Ma and a dozen devotees came there on pilgrimage, seeking darshan of the presiding deity. As Ma was leaving, she put a small sweet in the swami's mouth and placed a flower on his head. He was so awed by her sanctity and divine presence that for the rest of his 108 days of seclusion each time he looked at the murthi in his small temple he saw her face.

Some time later, the Swami pilgrimaged to the Dakshineswar Temple on the Ganges where Sri Ramakrishna once lived. He meditated all day in Ramakrishna's room. While meditating, he heard the word "Belgichi." Local residents told him it was the name of a town nearby and when he went there he found the house where Ma and her devotees lived.

They have been travelling together since then, in Nepal, Bangladesh and India, performing Shakti pujas in towns along the way. They would typically stop in a small town and form a clay and straw image of Mother Shakti, perform a puja for all who gathered, then destroy the image and continue on their way.