Siva Statue Alights near Bangalore Airport
Category : August 1995
Published by Anonymous on Aug. 01, 1995

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Choodie Shivaram, Bangalore

As you head from Bangalore airport towards the city, an amazing sight now arrests autodrivers, bikepeddlers and pedestrians alike. Just about 100 meters away, off the road, stands an awesome, milk-white statue of Lord Siva, poised in a perfect lotus position. This 65-foot tall statue is said to be the world's tallest Siva, according to sponsors Vashi Melwani and his son Ravi.

I first saw the monument late at night. I was driving by and was dumbstruck. My heart skipped a beat. There were no night spotlights on the statue (as there are now) and even the street lamps were off. Only the moonlight illumined Him. It was eerie and magical and seemed as if Lord Siva had really descended to Earth.

Last March headlines in Bangalore carried impressive photos of the Siva statue to be inaugurated on Maha Sivaratri by His Holiness Sri Sri Baharthi Theertha Mahaswami Shankaracharya of Sringeri. Sculpted out of man-made stone, the statue is exquisitely proportioned with finely chiseled features. The backdrop is a Himalayan setting with waterfalls. At His feet is a small pond which the sponsors have named Manasarovar, after the sacred lake at the foot of Mount Kailash. The crystal clear water gently reflects the image of Siva. By evening, Siva is brightly lit by powerful reflective lights.

"It was our dream that came true," chorus Vashi Melwani and his 27-year-old son, Ravi, the brains behind this structure. The Melwanis are the proprietors of a well-known garment showroom in Bangalore. "It was my father's dream to build a temple," says Vashi. "He was a great devotee of Siva. He didn't have sufficient funds. Ravi and myself had this dream since his death. By God's grace we have enough money now, and we thought the time had come to materialize our dream.

We wanted to build something that would become the talk of the world. Religion has become boring. So we thought we should give something new and different to people-a temple where they could touch the Lord and worship, a place where they could communicate with the Lord and meditate. Initially we thought it may take a year for the statue/temple to be completed, but the artisans completed it in five months in order to have it inaugurated on Maha Sivaratri," says Ravi. It took 250 workers to complete the job.

Beside the statue, inside a small cave-like enclosure is a black granite Sivalingam. "This Sivalingam was consecrated for puja," states Vinay Gupta, an engineering student who now works as the caretaker here. Concrete images of Ganapati and Parvati are installed on the left of the statue.

The Siva sculpture was designed under the leadership of Kashinath of Shimoga, an expert at temple construction. So far the Melwanis have spent US$33,000 on the project. There is more work pending completion, like the background resembling the Himalayas, the parikramaaround Siva, the "Omkar tunnel" and the queue stand for people to wait for their turn for darshan.

Despite their distinctive contribution towards the religio/cultural development of Bangalore, the Melwanis have run into sharp criticism from the media. The duo, known for their high-profile advertising and promotion of their garment showroom, Kids Kemp, have been accused of building the statue for business promotion. What fueled these allegations are the plans of the Melwanis to build a big complex housing their showroom right in front of the Siva statue, between it and main road. It is also felt that the new garment store will obstruct the statue from easy public view.

"It is such a beautiful statue the Kids Kemp people have given to Bangalore," comments Venkatesh, a bank employee, as his friends nod in agreement. "But they should not cheapen it with gimmicks like Om Namah Shivaya towels and raincoats. There is no doubt that this is a self-promotion venture."

Addressing these allegations Vashi Melwani says, "Our garment store caters to the affluent class since our merchandise is priced high. We are sure of our customers. On the contrary, people from all classes come for darshanof Shiva. For many of

them, our prices are not within reach. So how can you call it a publicity gimmick? Maybe if I had built a hotel serving idlisand dosas, people would have stopped over for a bit. We only plan to utilize the space in front for our complex, but not in a way that will hamper people from having darshan of Siva. But then, why should Siva become a roadside sight anyway? If people really want to see Him, they will have to come in to Him."

I went again one Sunday morning and found the spot packed. It was already a tourist bus stop. Sunday attendance alone is up to 10,000.

Bali's Floating Temple