America Celebrates Liberty! Three Major Hindu Temples Open As Millions Honor Freedom at the Unveiling of a Restored Lady Liberty
Category : August 1986
Published by Anonymous on Aug. 01, 1986

America Celebrates Liberty! Three Major Hindu Temples Open As Millions Honor Freedom at the Unveiling of a Restored Lady Liberty

She is 100 hundred years old this month, and her full name is "Liberty Enlightening the World." She has welcomed millions to the New World, among them hundreds of thousands of American Hindus who joined in week-long festivities that were emotionally moving, visually stunning and universally meaningful.

At Ellis Island, New York Harbor, all the world idolizes Lady Liberty, the deity of liberty, the goddess of freedom. With a seven-pointed crown signifying the earth's seven continents, golden torch held aloft, she rivals the colossus of India's standing Mahavira and China's sitting Buddha sculptures. The Statue of Liberty is America's idol. And July 4th was her Mahakumbhabhishekam, a refurbishing of copper, and steel, a recharging of spirit with parades, sailing flotillas, speeches and a supernovae of laser lights and fireworks.

Hindus shared a unique view of the events. First of all, there was a certain pleasant irony in seeing the whole American public unabashedly idolizing a statue. Never mind that this goddess offers liberty and traditional murthis bespeak liberation; one is prerequisite for the other. Secondly, the very freedoms Liberty stands for-including the freedom of religion-have allowed Hinduism to become an important and swiftly growing facet of the U.S. melting pot. More than ever, it is clear that the world's oldest religion will be part of the future American landscape.

While America celebrated independence and the liberties enshrined in the Bill of Rights, a historic and picture-perfect expression of American religious freedom unfolded in two suburbs of Chicago, Illinois and Livermore, California. Not one, but three lovely Hindu temples: the Sri Rama Hindu Temple in Lemont, Illinois (June 27 - July 6), the Sri Venkateswara (Balaji) Swami Temple in Aurora, Illinois June 15 -

June 22) and the Livermore Shiva/Vishnu Hindu Temple (July 9 - July 13).

After years of planning, politicking with zoning commissions, million-dollar fund-raisers and block-laying in 102-degree to sub-zero weather all three temples within a week of each other opened their vimana towers to the inner akasha sky and their doors to the Hindu public. Combined, the festivities drew 30,000 bhaktas, dignitaries and well wishers, including crowds of curious Americans, ever seeking the exotic. They found it. The triple consecrations were an unabashed display of Hindu color and pageantry, a spiritual party in the new Homes of the Gods. The Livermore Shiva/Vishnu Temple went all out. At the crescendo of the water-empowering ceremonies, when all 11 dieties were being bathed simultaneously a helicopter beat the air right over the main towers scattering clouds of rose petals. Earlier there was a grand parade around the temple led by a circus elephant shimmering with traditional caparison garb from Madras. And hundreds of devotees clambered up 40-foot scaffolding, kalasa pots on shoulders in blistering heat to participate in the tower sanctification.

Unlike Lady Liberty which was unveiled totally finished, these temples are not quite complete. But the Phase I sanctum and tower work had been finished to a degree that these millennium-old rites could be performed. With clear skies both in California and Illinois, amid New Delhi-like heat, a platoon of brahmin priests sheparded the scripturally exacting complexities of one of Hinduism's grand cosmological functions: the towers were energized, the deities and yantras installed, the stone image's mystic eye-opening rites held and the shakti power anchored down through jewels and gold into the very body of the Earth.

Groundwork: Getting to that point was equally as hectic as the Liberty statue's renovation time-table, perhaps more so. Two months ago, the Sri Rama Temple in Lemont was still an I-beam and concrete shell, a hollow hulk with little inkling of its full glory. Now, its a majestic Agamic structure with intricately sculptured towers. Only the rajagopuram (the highest, royal tower at the main entrance) is still being crafted by the master sthilpis (sacred sculptures) from India. As Mr. Gundamaraju, Manager of the temple relates, "The construction company literally worked day and night, weekends, holidays-a tremendous commitment of time and energy. And the team of 21 silpis under Shanmugam Sthapati has worked from 8 in the morning till midnight every day for the last two months. Now they're still going on the rajagopuram." For the Balaji Temple, sitting on one of the prettiest sites in the U.S., it was a similar push to the limits to finish the main sanctuary and towers.

The Livermore Shiva/Vishnu Temple went all out. At the crescendo of the water-empowering ceremonies, when all 11 dieties were being bathed simultaneously a helicopter beat the air right over the main towers scattering clouds of rose petals. Earlier there was a grand parade around the temple led by a circus elephant shimmering with traditional caparison garb from Madras. And hundreds of devotees clambered up 40-foot scaffolding, kalasa pots on shoulders in blistering heat to participate in the tower sanctification.

On July 15, Mr. K. Venkateswara, Chairman of the Religious Committee of the Livermore Hindu Temple told Hinduism Today, "Our silpis just left today for the Malibu Venkateswara Temple in Los Angeles. All of our sanctums and vimana towers (superstructures over the deity sanctums) are done. The rajagopuram and side entrances are yet to be done." The Livermore Temple's skyline is unique. As it contains two central sanctums, one for Lord Venkateswara (Vishnu) and the other for Siva Lingam Vishwanath, there are two main vimanas. The Vishnu vimana is typically South Indian design, stacks of dimishing tiers. The Siva vimana is typically North Indian, stacks of rounded, rectangular rings.

Forging Ties: The pace of North American temple construction, given they aren't carved in granite, is remarkable. Perhaps the best parallel in Indian history is the rapid rebuilding of hundreds of temples in Siva's City of Banaras after they were pulverized to rubble by Muslim invaders and emperors. That these American temples came so far so fast is also a tribute to the hereditary Sthapati architects behind these projects: Muthiah Sthapati for the Balaji and Livermore Shiva/Vishnu Temple; Ganapati Sthapati for the Sri Rama Temple. Both, forwarding the tradition of their ancestors have been the guiding minds behind most of the modern Agamic temples outside of India.

The close simultaneity of the kumbhabhishekams built a bridge of spiritual support across America's heartland. A quartet of Vedacharya priests from Tirupati, India, each one expert in one of the Vedas-Rig, Sama, Yajur, Atharva-helped officiate at the Sri Rama Temple in Illinois, then flew 48 hours later to the Livermore Shiva/Vishnu Temple. The pinnacle highness of the ceremonies, after years of struggle also knit bonds across India's vast geography. As Mr. Venkateswara emotionally commented, "This is the first time I've seen Indians from the North, South, East and West (of India) blend so harmoniously. People were so moved by the force of the event."

The Chicago area produced mammoth crowds. "Over our ten days, 21, 000 people came-9,000 alone on July 4th for the main sanctification of the dieties," says Mr. Gundamaraju of the Sri Rama Temple. "There was a lot of attention from the citizens of Lemont. The mayor came and about 1,000 attended the open house."

For the highlight awakening abhishekams (water absolutions) at Livermore there were 5,000 people, including the Lt. Governor of California, Mr. Leo McCarthy. He was actually the first one inside the temple "for security reasons," says Mr. Venkateswara who escorted Mr. McCarthy to each of the sanctums and shrines. "He was given tirtham (sanctified water), flowers from the deity and a circle of kumkum on his forehead. He says he'll be back for the Mahakumbhabhishekam, when the rajagopuram is finished."

Sublime: As Livermore is in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, there was wide coverage of the celebrations. "All the channels covered it and both the Chronicle and Examiner," Mr. Venkateswara proudly states. "We made a video ourselves and are now having it professionally edited."

Such highly spiritual rites must be conducted by orthodox Hindu priests, the DNA custodians of templecraft. Their marathon staccato chanting, graceful mudras, elaborate homas and devotional mindset are a portal to the super-conscious worlds of the Deities. The new temples brought over some of the best from India. For both the Sri Rama Temple and the Livermore Shiva/Vishnu temple the chief Vishnavite priest was Sri M. R. Sampathkumar Bhattacharya. For the Siva Lingam sanctum at Livermore, Rajappa Gurukkal presided and Pandit Ravichandran, Livermore's resident priest, coordinated the team of 11 priests including the Vedacharyas. Among the most stunning scenes throughout the ceremonies, which most people missed, were the dawn rites held in the cool, ruddy-glowing rise of the sun. "These ceremonies at dawn were very special, sublime. They took me back to ancient India," said Mr. Venkateswara.

Now the temples are engaged in post-consecration rituals, special ceremonies held for the Siva Lingam over a period of 48 days. The construction continues; the worship builds as Hindus establish a real communion with their Supreme Deity and the devas. It's been a white hot summer of spiritual regeneration in the U.S. with the Paschimakasi Vishvanath (Siva) Temple of Flint, Michigan, holding its final Mahakumbhabhishekam and other temples under construction in 8 other states. Swami Satchidananda's lovely Light of Truth Universal Shrine, LOTUS, in Yogaville,

Virginia, also opened its doors in mid-July. Three thousand miles to the East, the members of the London Murugan temple are seeing the fruits of a decade of effort blossom forth, their consecration and sanctifying sacraments occurring as Hinduism Today goes to press. Truly, it is a time to celebrate. May liberty and liberation enlighten the world!