

[Leading Priest Initiates American Scholar into Saivism](#)

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PEOPLE

## Leading Priest Initiates American Scholar into Saivism Chennai ceremony fulfills long-term desire

Amba Caldwell began the study of yoga in 1978, under the guidance of Swami Muktananda, and has considered herself a Hindu ever since. She lived full time at his ashram in India until 1982, and upon his mahasamadhi that year returned to the University of California at Berkeley. She completed her Ph.D. in anthropology in 1995, having spent two years in Kerala on her thesis. During that time, she formally converted to Hinduism through the Arya Samaj. She has remained a practitioner of Siddha Yoga under the guidance of one of Swami Muktananda's successors, Swami Nityananda. Last year, Amba held the post of visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School.

Her spiritual life has continued to develop, and in the fall of 2001, just before Navaratri, she began to attend the Sri Mahalakshmi Temple in Ashland, Massachusetts, where she was befriended by the temple's Saiva priest, Sri Bairava Sundaram, and his wife, Mangala. "Through

their guidance and friendship," she told Hinduism Today, "I came to know about Mangala's father, Sri Sambamurthy Sivachariar. I developed a strong desire to meet him and to take formal diksha, initiation, from him to deepen my knowledge of Saiva and Sakta worship."

She sought and received permission from her guru, and from Sri Sambamurthy himself, for the initiation, and then went to Chennai in March, 2001, for the ceremony. "I was very warmly welcomed," she recalls, "by the families of both Bairava Sundaram in Madurai and Sri Sambamurthy Sivachariar in Chennai, who hosted me at their homes with great love and kindness."

The initiation was set for the Thirumazhissai Siva temple outside Chennai, the birthplace and ancestral home of Sri Sambamurthy. The March 31 ceremony was very elaborate, as it coincided with the temple's Brahmotsavam festival, which brought 150 priests for the rituals. There were ten other initiates that day, mostly young boys and men from Sivachariar's family. "I was the only woman and the only Westerner included in this ceremony," she said, "but I was told it was done for several Westerners before." This was also the day that Sri Sambamurthy was presented this magazine's Hindu Renaissance Award honoring him as Hindu of the Year for 2002. [See Nov/Dec, 2001]

The rituals preceding the initiation into the mantra were elaborate. At one point, Amba was asked to throw a handful of flowers onto a yantra, or sacred diagram, with five faces corresponding to the five faces of Lord Siva. The color segment in which the flowers land indicates the lineage of Sivachariars that one is joining. Amba's landed in the white segment, indicating her initiation lineage of Satyojata, which is in the western segment of the yantra. The shakti, or feminine power, associated with the Satyojata face of Shiva is Ambika or Amba, which the priests all felt was fitting as her name, Amba, already had been given. They added, "You are white and you are from the West, so it's perfect!" The priests determined that the initiation name should be "Satyojata Ganashakti Amba."

Next came the moment of initiation, when the mantra is spoken in the ear of the initiate by the priest while both are under a decorative cloth. Amba recalls, "I then offered flowers into the yagna pit and to the presiding priest and was seated under the red silk cloth. For all the previous initiates the priest sitting near the yagna had been the one to give the mantra. But now Sri Sambamurthy himself had joined us. He loudly and powerfully bestowed the mantra in my ear, and then it was over."

After the diksha, the priests who had presided over the

ceremony carried two kalasams, water pots, representing Lord Siva and Parvati, around the temple, then bathed the Siva Linga inside the sanctum. "The water from the kalasam was also doused over us initiates," Amba said, "and a feeling of real ecstasy ensued."

Contact Amba Caldwell at [sarahleec@prodigy.net](mailto:sarahleec@prodigy.net)