A Stonecarvers Story
Category : September/October 2000
Published by Anonymous on Sep. 02, 2000

ARTISTS

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Exquisite icons of the Gods from the hands of Perumal Sthapati bless temples around the world

Kesav Mallia, Chennai, India

It was dipavali time in india, 1969, and the dusty Tenkasi town was painted red. All roads led to the Bharathan Theatre, where Daiva Magan, was just released. Among the crowd was 15-year-old Perumal, whose prime joy in life was movies--he eventually saw this one film 20 times. But today Perumal, at 46, has little interest in movies. In fact, he hasn't been to the theater in 17 years. The reason--he's consumed with his life's work as a sthapati, a master temple architect and builder, and as principle disciple of Ganapati Sthapati [see Hinduism Today July/August, 2000].

Perumal's workshop near Mamallapuram was bustling with activity early this year. As many as 50 silpis, craftsmen, were busy crafting statues for temples in India, Sri Lanka and all over the US. A strict religious sthapati, Perumal wakes up early each morning to carve. His workshop also follows a strict religious regimen with group worship every Friday night. In respect to the deities and stones, his silpis are required to take

off their shoes while in the carving area. He's a gentle taskmaster, never raising his voice to berate his workers. The crews work seven days a week, ten hours a day, when projects demand. Perumal is also a dedicated father who has three children--Sundari, Mallai Rajan and Krishmamurthy.

Perumal was born at Thrissur in Kerala. He had no plan to be a sculptor when he came to Chennai in 1972. Under the guidance of Ganapati Sthapati, scores of silpis were brought from different parts of Tamil Nadu at the time when many temples were coming up in Poompuhar, India. Mahabalipuram was agog with activities. Here, Ganapati Sthapati spotted the innate talent and striking personal elegance of Perumal. "You stay here with me," were Ganapati Sthapati's words that changed Perumal's life.

Now after more than 26 years of association with Ganapati Sthapati, Perumal has reached dizzying heights. "I can read my guru's heart, his taste, his mind and expectations," Perumal says. "He is a clever taskmaster, yet surprisingly lovable. Even today, I am afraid of him. He can smell even the slightest errors. I feel that I am only a novice in front of him. I have no time for any other activities or entertainments." Ganapati Sthapati has returned the respect, saying, "Perumal is the greatest carver in South India today."

Perumal's best work is likely the 10-foot-tall Anantha Padmanabha Swami (a form of Lord Vishnu), now enshrined in the Siva-Vishnu Temple in Maryland, US. Much of his greatest work has gone overseas. His icons of the Gods now reside at the Lakshmi Narayana Temple in London, in the Batu Caves

and the Mariamman Temple in Malaysia, in Chicago, Fiji and New Jersey. And for a temple in St. Louis, Missouri, he created nearly 20 icons.

He was instrumental in the completion of the 133-foot-tall Tiruvalluvar statue just unveiled at Kanyakumari, and responsible for the all-important face and hands. Under the guidance of Ganapati Sthapati, the master is responsible for the intricate ornamental carving in the all-granite Iraivan Temple being built in Kauai, Hawaii, US, (at the home of Hinduism Today).

Conversation with Perumal

Hinduism Today'scorrespondent Jiva Rajasankara interviewed Perumal Sthapati in Bangalore, India at the carving site for Iraivan Temple. This all-stone granite temple will eventually be assembled at the ashram in Kauai. Perumal is the chief ornamental carver for the project.

Bringing life to a Deity: When I am asked to carve a Ganesha icon, I get totally merged into the carving of Ganesha and become Ganesha himself. I normally do not work with a limited time frame but rather carve the Ganesha until I am fully satisfied with it. I do not work quickly to complete the job in order to make as much profit as possible. Internal visualization is important, only then can you bring out the mental impressions in you and carve them physically on the stone. Most sculptors do not work on these principles. There is very little dedication towards the work they do. A sculptor who is a vegetarian, who has good morals and habit patterns, who has a strong religious foundation and who is trained under a

qualified sthapati makes better icons. However, the main aim of most of today's stone sculptors is to make maximum profit. A greed for money or a sculptor with negative habit patterns like smoking and drinking cannot make Ganesha smile!!! That is the truth.

Master apprentices: Right now I do not have any apprentice with skill close to mine. Many have come and worked for a few months only, but the moment they can carve a Ganesha with an elephant face, they feel they have mastered the craft. All of them who have come to learn under me do not have the patience, tolerance, dedication or urge to learn the craft. The burning desire to become the best is not there in them. Their burning desire is to make money. They leave to become half-baked sculptors. Half-baked sculptors are in great demand at Mahabalipuram. They either work as a sthapati at a worksite or start their own unit with the little knowledge they have.

About your teacher: Ganapati Sthapati is my guru. I am very, very sincere and dedicated to him. I do not claim that I have learned everything. In the early days, I started my work early in the morning and continually until 8 or 9 at night. Ganapati Sthapati would teach and correct my mistakes in a very nice way. Even today, when I carve a statue, I have a secure feeling that my guru is standing beside me and guiding me in every bit of my chipping.

Your son's training: My son, Mallai Rajan, has completed a diploma course on temple architecture and is currently doing a degree course in the same field. He is following in my footsteps. During his college vacations, he comes and helps

me with my work. I teach him and guide him to carve. Besides this, he also helps in drawing the temple plans. I am sure he will be able to pick up the art once he works with me full-time. He knows my expectations and how hard I have worked over the decades to be what I am.

San Marga Iraivan Temple: I was assigned by Ganapati Sthapati to recruit the carvers for the Iraivan Temple project. I was involved for over a year at the beginning. I will work on the first few of all the intricate ornamental carvings. I show the other silpis how to carve them and then do the follow-up. My special assignments are the carving of the gomukai, or water spout, and the musical pillars, among others. I have a lot of affection and bhakti towards Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami [HT publisher and builder of Iraivan Temple]. After Raja Raja Chola [1000 ce], Gurudeva is the only one who is carving a totally hand-made granite temple. Gurudeva allows us to work carefully on all the intricate designs. He insists on quality and wants to bring the intricate works of stone to the West. Most people these days do not have the patience, money and time as he has to wait 12 to 15 years to complete a temple. Gurudeva has uplifted our carving community to the world by writing several articles in Hinduism Today on our temple and stone works. At his carving site in Bangalore, he has provided several unheard-of benefits for the stone carvers. The silpis are insured, they have a retirement benefit plan and are paid a bonus annually. Also, it is the only temple project in India which is run like a gurukulam. All the silpis assemble at 7:30 am for a puja and sing some bhajanas. Then they go off to work. I really like that. We need spiritual leaders like Gurudeva to promote our heritage on stone.