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Sivaya Subramuniayaswami and Local Devotees Establish First Saiva Dharmasala in Concord; a Temple, Cultural Center and School Modeled on American Church Patterns

Hinduism took another bold step forward in America on May 2nd with the establishment of its first Saiva dharmasala. This religious center emerges in Concord, California, in an impressive former Greek Orthodox Church. It is one of many Hindu temples arising today in Christian facilities gone fallow. But while most new temple centers are patterned on the British/Indian system, this one is organized like an American church, while maintaining orthodox Hindu traditions of culture and worship.

Over 300 enthusiastic devotees and well wishers attended the inaugural ceremonies organized by the Saiva Siddhanta Church Concord Mission. Located near Concord's burgeoning business district, the dharmasala is a four-building Spanish-style complex with red-tiled roof. It includes a temple, cultural hall, kitchen, children's school, a monastery and new Hinduism Today subscription and advertising offices.

Gurudeva Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, the global Church's founder and pastor of the Concord Mission, presided. At about 9 AM, shortly after a guru puja, a homa-fire ceremony was performed, culminating in the installation of a three foot granite murthi of Lord Ganesha in a dancing pose. The rites were conducted by two Sivachariya priests: Kumaraswamy Dikshithar of The Hindu Temple Society of the Capital District, New York, and Sri Kannan Gurukkal, the priest in residence. In preparation, a homa & abhishekam (bathing ceremony), had been conducted each night for the preceding thirty days.

Four other leaders graced the occasion: Swami Satchidananda of Integral Yoga Institute; Swami Pragyananda of Pragya Mission; Swami Savitripriya of Holy Mountain Saivite Monastery; and Aitreya Rishi of ISKCON.

Each gave a talk on the purpose of temple worship. Shortly after noon Gurudeva spoke, describing the dharmasala as a complete complex for a Church mission. Though the Church has 27 missions worldwide, he explained, this is the first to create a dharmasala. The mission is managed by a 10-member Council on Ministries and a clergy of 7 married men.

Several hundred Hindu families live in Concord, and many have expressed delight that there is now a Hindu temple so near. With the exception of ISKCON's Berkeley Temple, 25 miles away, other temples are at least forty miles away, including the Hindu Center in Livermore, the Vedic Dharma Samaj in Fremont and the Palani Swami Temple in San Francisco. The general East Bay area has one of the largest concentrations of Hindu families in Northern California, an estimated 2-3,000, mostly doctors, engineers, professors and businessmen. S.R. Iyer of Hayward told the gathering that with this temple only four blocks from the Rapid Transit station, he and other Hindus who don't own a car can easily come to worship.

It's a sunny spring day In Northern California-May 2nd, 1987. After many years of work and service, Saiva Siddhanta Church opened its first Saiva dharmasala. Literally, "a place where dharma is performed," dharmasala is an ancient term applied in modern settings. Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, sometimes compares the dharmasala to the Buddhist religious complex, which also comprises a school for children, a place of worship, priest quarters, a cultural hall and a monastery. The dharmasala comes in the 30th year of Saiva Siddhanta Church, founded by the American Sat Guru in 1957.

The heart of the dharmasala is its temple, a spiritual focal point of the Gods and devas and source of inspiration for devotees. At the inauguration of the Concord Dharmasala on May 2nd, each of the four guest swamis spoke on the importance of the temple. One compared the soul to a radio receiver which could be tuned to receive the transmissions that God is always sending out and emphasized that the temple was the best place to accomplish this sacred communion. Another focused on the importance of approaching the temple with the proper attitude which is one of giving and surrender. Other speakers included Siva Veylanswami, a renunciate disciple of Gurudeva, and Alvin Buchignani, the Church's San Francisco attorney for over two decades.

Leadership for the mission has been enlisted and trained from among the families, many of whom have been Church members for 20 years and more. In his address,

Gurudeva explained that the dharmasala is coordinated through the efforts of the Council on Ministries of the Mission and by seven assistant pastors also known as "Adiyar." They are: the Reverend Deva Rajan, Reverend Nandi Devam, Reverend Nathan Palani, Reverend Easan Katir, Reverend Markandeya Peruman and Reverend Deva Seyon and the Reverend Rajan Kumaran. The first four named Adiyars live in the area and take turns each week managing the dharmasala facility, lecturing each night, giving a special sermon on Sundays, counseling, inspiring others and welcoming visitors.

Gurudeva described in detail how important it is for the Hindu religion to provide guidance and counselling through a trained clergy of family men and encouraged other Hindu centers to implement their own program of grihastha ministry. The open house ended with a Bharata Natyam dance performance by Uma Iyer and Kali Nalluran, who are students of Mr. and Mrs. Kunhiraman of the Kalanjali Dance School.

"Until now the only temple we have had in this area is our small Palani Swami Temple in San Francisco, which I established in 1957," stated Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, in a subsequent interview. "In recent years many of our Church members, however, had settled in Concord and neighboring cities and found it difficult to travel often to San Francisco as it is some forty miles away. This new center is dose to their homes and will enable them, especially the children, to come daily to worship and study. We are pleased to accomplish this expansion and invite all Hindus in and around Concord to come and worship Lord Ganesha during our homa and abhishekam held each evening."

"The children" was a common theme stressed by the majority of lay leaders who were interviewed. They explained that many of the children, rather than going to public school, have been attending a special study program conducted by some of the mothers in their homes. The academic curriculum is based on a correspondence course provided and supervised by the Dade County School Board. Supplementary religious classes provide education in the traditional Saivite religion and culture of South India. But with over thirty children in the pre-school and grammar school programs, "Our school had outgrown even the largest of our homes," stated the Reverend Easan Katir. The new facility provides eight small classrooms for the children.

One mother from Sri Lanka, Rathi Anandasakaran, stated that having the school

next to the temple is ideal for the younger children as over the years they will constantly be filling their subconscious minds with religious impressions and be in the refined atmosphere of the temple every school day. This is particularly important in the West, she said, as there is no other place to absorb these traditional ways. Her summary: "This is not another temple but actually a school in the premises of a temple."

Church members who have recently moved to the area note that their children are delighted to have so many friends who share their religious beliefs. Youth programs as well as the Mission's Boy Scout Troup are noticeably maturing character among the older children.

The dharmasala property was purchased from the Greek Orthodox Community of Western Contra Costa County who conducted services there for twenty years. It is near Mt. Diablo, a mountain that the American Indians held to be a very sacred spot. In their mythology the creation of the world and later that of mankind proceeded from this mountain, which in the beginning was an island.

Concord, with a population of 105,000 and several fine parks, is a growing business community into which the Bank of America has recently moved its world headquarters. The temple is open every evening from 6-9 P.M. with a homa and abhishekam to Lord Ganesha beginning at 6:30 P.M. Chaturthi day each month features a special puja at noon.

The large cultural hall and commercial kitchen are available to Hindu groups for weddings festivals, feasts and other gatherings. The Saiva Siddhanta Church Concord Mission is located at 1803 Second Street in Concord, CA 94519. Phone: 415/685-5830.

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