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TEMPLES

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New temple initiates the worship of Lord Murugan on the doorstep of the US capital

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LANHAM, MARYLAND, A QUIET SUBURB of Washington, D.C., was deluged by passionate Hindus, May 29-31, during the super-charged opening ceremonies of the US's first traditional temple dedicated to Lord Murugan. Elders in the crowds (upwards of 4,000 people) were outnumbered by young professionals and piously patient children at the Murugan Temple of North America. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, Sri Swami Satchidananda and Ramasamy Adigal personally assisted the installation of Deities. Rituals were empowered by a cadre of nine renowned priests, including India's Sambamurti Sivacharya of the Kalikambal temple in Chennai, Thangam Bhattar of the Madurai Meenakshi citadel and Sambasiva Sivacharya of Palani Hills.

The temple stands on 11.5 acres of prime land adjacent to the Washington Beltway. It covers approximately 7,000 square feet and is fashioned in the Chola style. The main deity, Lord Murugan, stands at an imposing 7.25 feet, in a sanctum which

is covered in granite (a donation from an industrialist in Coimbatore, India). Consorts Valli and Deviyanai stand at 6.5 feet on either side of Murugan. Other deities in the temple include Ganesha, the Siva Lingam, Goddess Meenakshi and Palani Andavar. The basement boasts a community center in which cultural and religious events will be held.

"This is a miracle," proclaims Executive Committee member Muthukkanna Guruswamy, a pillar of the temple since its inception. "Once you enter, you can immediately see all the Gods. The statues are so beautiful and life-like, and everything was done according to the shastras. We compromised nothing."

Seventeen years of dedication and faith is what finally built the temple, which was spurred in 1982 after an earlier split from another Hindu temple in the area. At that time, Dr. Gopal Guruswamy was asked to spearhead the temple efforts as President. "I accepted because I have strong faith in Murugan," he notes, faith which is equally shared by his wife. "We decided to build His temple at any cost," Guruswamy said.

A core group of supporters searched four years for land. Yet once land was obtained, years of petitions for permits and lack of funds to build with tested the faith of followers. "We went through some dark days. Many people thought this temple was not going to come," Guruswamy recalls. "Yet I knew there were hundreds of thousands of devotees of Murugan. I had to get in touch with them. It is they who helped us."

Guruswamy spread awareness of the temple in order to alert other Murugan devotees to the fact that this international temple could only be built with their support. "Wherever people were praying to Murugan, they gave encouragement," adds Mrs. Guruswamy. Devotees in Quebec, Canada, chartered busses and drove 13 hours to attend the kumbabhishekam.

US President Bill Clinton sent his greetings for the temple opening: "Your beautiful new temple stands as evidence of the faith and vision of your community, that enduring faith binds members of a congregation together in fellowship and prayer, and will help to lead all of you through the struggles and joys of life. Our country was founded on a great tradition of religious liberty, which helps to unite our nation of diverse faiths and creeds and gives us a common ground for tolerance, healing and understanding. This celebration is a reminder of the ways that God's blessings can be used to fulfill our obligation to help others."

The temple caters to the culture of South Indians, of whom 500,000 currently reside in the United States. In addition, the temple was built especially to preserve the Tamil traditions. Thus, prayers in the temple are conducted equally in Sanskrit and in Tamil.

"It is a God-given opportunity," said Mrs. Guruswamy. "It changed my whole life." Dr. Guruswamy adds, "It was my dream. I prayed for years that the kumbabhishekam should be conducted on a grand scale unheard of before. I would ask Murugan: 'Where are Your people? What happened to You? Don't You have followers all over the world?' ...This is His

answer."

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