Against All Odds
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Driven from land, Sewdass built his temple in the sea

Anil Mahabir, Trinidad

Sewdass Sadhu was born to poverty-stricken parents in India on January 1, 1903. Yet he was a man with an inexplicable desire to build a house of God against impossible odds and regardless of the consequences to himself and his family. He first came to Trinidad as an indentured laborer for five years. After completing the contract as a cane cutter, he returned to India only to realize he had reentered poverty. So he returned to Trinidad and settled in Waterloo, a predominantly pro-Christian and anti-Hindu village.

In 1947 he built the foundation of his dream temple on sugar company land. When British authorities ordered him to stop, he refused and continued construction. He was arrested, prosecuted and incarcerated for 14 days for violating the order. His temple was demolished. After his release, Sewdass pledged to build his temple on "no man's land"--the sea.

Every day thereafter Sewdass Sadhu would pack a small leather bag with foundation blocks and journey to the seaside on a bicycle. He placed these in the ocean, and gradually built up the stones until a small island rose from the water. In time,

Sewdass Sadhu built a cement structure above the ocean waters, which he freely used as the havan site for his prayers. Sumintra, a community elder, remembers, "People used to laugh and make fun of the man when, day after day, he would be seen riding his bicycle for miles to the sea. Many of the villagers said he was mad, but that did not bother him. Look what we have today, a beautiful Siva temple. Is that madness?" The little-known Hindu sadhu died in 1970.

In 1995 the temple was rebuilt in exquisite style, and today is a main tourist attraction. Located on the central-western tip of the island, with a view of Venezuela's coastline, the temple is maintained by village women who gather every evening to offer prayers and sing bhajans.

Also in 1995 the local Hindu Seva Sangh installed a statue of Sewdass near the temple entrance. It is only the second statue honoring a Trinidadian of Indian origin in the country.

Legend has it that the man who gave the order to destroy Sewdass Sadhu's first temple and the man who bulldozed the edifice died under mysterious circumstances while Sewdass was in jail.