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DEVOTION

Brick, Mortar Not Enough

A Small temple arises from one man's big heart

Gowri Shanker, Chennai

Samy, as Tiru Tiruvanmiyur Ramasamy Chinnathamby is popularly known, is exceptional. How else would you describe a man who, driven by a frenzy to install Lord Ganesha in his native village, bicycled ninety miles in a day, then returned the same distance carrying a 110 lb. icon, nearly nonstop?

Samy has been the sole pujari of the Mangani Vinayakar temple in Thiruvanmiyur, Chennai, for the last seventeen years. His love of all devotees, rich or poor, brahmins or non-brahmins, young or old is as heartening as it is rare. I casually asked, "When you are not well, who takes your place?" His reply stunned me. "Until today the Lord has not put me on such a spot."

Samy narrates, "In 1963 at age twenty-five I attended a festival in my native village, Thiruvanmiyur, and was reminded of a stone Pillaiyar seen years prior. He was sadly missing and I thought, "Why not set up another Pillaiyar on the same spot?" The idea began to dominate my psyche. In seeking a murti, a washerman told me of an idol in his village. Mounting my bike on the first off day, I pedaled as if possessed. Taking just a day to cover ninety miles to Fort Gingi, I found the Pillaiyar, eagerly hauled Him onto my bike and turned around, my spirit soaring, hardly aware of anything save Pillaiyar. With the heavy stone icon behind me, I had no right to travel so fast. But I was berserk. The return journey took only slightly longer than coming."

After placing the murti in a well for 48 days, then having it traditionally packed in paddy and stored away, Samy had a thatched roof woven above the Lord. Ganesha Chaturthi festival arrived, and the Lord was humbly installed amid Vedic chanting. "But I was uneasy. When locking the door of the flimsy bamboo shed housing the Lord, I was not sure if I would find Him the next day." He set aside income and succeeded in building a small temple. But, during a monsoon last January the temple roof leaked copiously. A neighbor observed, "Samy did not sleep for a week. I found him weeping and muttering: 'I don't care if my home is under water. But, how can I stand by and watch You in water like this?'" Renovations commenced and I have never seen Samy appealing for donations, nor have I come across any printed solicitation. However, this dynamic pujari's stature is such that contributions poured in unsought for. When he visited a hardware shop to buy building materials, the shopkeeper was so impressed by the old man's selectiveness and gusto that he decided to voluntarily supply materials free of cost.

After the May kumbhabhishekam, Samy felt blissful. "We did not lay bricks. It is His house. He built it himself." Samy's life shinningly testifies that it takes more than brick and mortar to build God's house.