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Obituary

Honoring a Master Architect Who Changed the Landscape of India

Dr. Vaidyanatha Ganapati Sthapati passes away at age 84 in Chennai

He did not start out to be a temple architect, even though trained in the art by his famed father, Sri Vaidyanatha Sthapati. Rather, son Ganapati took up a career teaching mathematics. But as the Tamil poet Valluvar wrote, "Though you cast it aside, what destiny calls yours will not depart." In 1957, at the age of 30, he joined the Tamil Nadu government temple board to oversee temple designs and construction. Thus began a lifetime of creative and innovative accomplishments. Eventually, he founded the Vastu Vedic Trust and embarked on a remarkable career.

Sthapati passed away September 6, 2011, at a hospital in Chennai, after several years of failing health. He is survived by his wife, G. Dakshnavathi, who now serves as founder trustee of the trust (www.vastuved.com). His nephew, K. Dakshinamoorthy Sthapati, is the managing trustee. Additional trustees are M. Palaniswamy Sthapati and S. Perumal Sthapati. All worked closely with him during his lifetime. In addition, his legacy is carried on by several trained sthapatils, including his nephew and life-long apprentice, R. Selvanathan of Chennai, and hundreds of architectural graduates and stone carvers.

V. Ganapati Sthapati hails from 30 generations of stone carvers and builders of the Vishwabrahmin family. He is a lineal descendant of Kunjara Mallan Raja Raja Perunthachan, who was commissioned by Rajaraja Chola I to build the Brihadisvara Temple to Lord Siva in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. That temple, completed in 1010 ce, remains one of the largest in all of India.

Sthapati's accomplishments are famous and many. The Valluvar Kottam in

Chennai and the Valluvar statue at Kanya Kumari honor the great Tamil saint who composed the Tirukural. Working closely with Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami for several decades, Sthapati designed Iraivan Temple here in Hawaii at the headquarters of Hinduism Today, one of only two all-stone Hindu temples built anywhere in the last hundred years. (The other is Sthapati's temple to Subramaniam in Delhi.) In addition, he designed and built the Tamil University in Thanjavur and other secular buildings.

In 1961 he followed his father as principal of the Government College of Architecture and Sculpture, Mamallapuram. The college had been founded just four years earlier to issue degrees in Vastu Shastra under the auspices of the University of Madras. This formal recognition of the traditional arts within the modern education system has done much to restore and elevate the status of Hindu architecture in today's India.

For 27 years Ganapati Sthapati meticulously trained three generations of temple architects, sculptors and carvers. He taught them, too, the profound mystical side of the silpi tradition--how to create not just sculptures, but the very body of God. During his tenure, he oversaw the construction of dozens of temples and the carving of thousands of sculptures. He authored books on the philosophical principles of Sthapatya Veda and Saiva Agamas and offered practical examples of, as he termed it, the creation of rhythm-bound forms that give rise to structures.

After retiring in 1988, he launched a private practice and was commissioned to build temples--not only in India but everywhere Hindus had settled in the past few decades--in America, England, Singapore, Malaysia, Fiji, Sri Lanka and Canada. His lifetime of work earned him the Padma Bhushan, one of India's highest honors, in 2009.

Accomplished artist, sculptor, designer and project manager, Ganapati Sthapati also succeeded at a broader and more meaningful goal: to establish India's ancient construction arts as an important and useful field of knowledge in the 21st century. In the process, he evaluated each aspect of the ancient art in terms of modern methods. The silpis, for example, use simple iron chisels made and maintained by on-site blacksmiths. Sthapati experimented with various metals to replace these iron tools, but ultimately found none an improvement over the traditional, cheap and easily created iron ones. As an alternate to breaking out stones with hand methods, he tried blasting them loose with dynamite. But stones so quarried, he

discovered, were subtly shattered by the blast and "lost their tone," making them unsuitable for sculpting.

Noticing the trend toward simpler and simpler sculptures, Sthapati brought forward clever and delicate demonstrations of the stone carver's art, such as the remarkable stone bell and clapper on a stone chain, all carved from a single rock. He made stone chains with large, loose links and created sets of musical pillars, each column designed to ring at a certain tone when struck.

Sthapati avidly explored the philosophical, theoretical and historical traditions of stone carving. This field encompasses all dimensions of architecture, from sculpture design to town planning. He generated renewed interest in the Vastu Shastras, the scriptures of this art, which he had translated into English from the original Sanskrit and ancient Tamil.

Intrigued by the Mayan architecture of South and Central America, Sthapati traveled to that region in 1995, visiting ancient monuments and meeting Mayan representatives. He was astounded by similarities between Mayan and Hindu construction design, right down to the use of the same measurements and proportions (see Hinduism Today, June 1995). Visiting the Incan ruins of Machu Picchu, he measured two ancient structures, a residence and a temple. He confirmed that the floor plans, location of doors and windows, proportions of width to length, roof styles, column sizes and wall thicknesses were identical to those prescribed in the Vastu Shastras. It was an astonishing and as yet under-appreciated discovery, still to be explained by modern science; the Mayans and Incas were never known to have been in contact with India. Sthapati believed that Maya, the founder of Hindu architecture, was directly related to the Mayan people in some way. Sthapati built what is believed to be the first temple to Maya at his home in Mahabalipuram.

M. Karunanidhi, former chief minister of Tamil Nadu and a supporter of several of the master's major projects, lamented Sthapati's passing: "His death is a great loss to the world of architecture and sculpture."

At Iraivan Temple in Hawaii, Sthapati will be a central figure in the "Temple Builders' Memorial," set in a nearby garden. Life-size bronzes of the temple's

founder blessing Ganapati Sthapati, shown holding the temple plans, are surrounded by the artisans and craftsmen performing the various tasks of creating the temple. Thus we honor a man who, fulfilling his duty, preserved and passed on the art of Hindu temple construction to a new generation of skilled craftsmen.