

## [Ganesha Temple Rises in Australia](#)

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# Ganesha Temple Rises in Australia

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It is a typical Melbourne winter day - cool, grey and overcast. I am searching for the Melbourne Vinayagar Hindu Sangam's temple project within a semi-rural suburb of The Basin, about 18 miles east of Melbourne. True to form, I am lost and running late. I am driving along the eponymous Mountain Highway when I find it rising amidst the eucalyptus trees - a traditional Hindu temple. The construction is scaffolded, and a group of warmly clad staphis are working under a canopy to protect themselves from the misting rain. My welcoming committee, clad in winter coats and rubber boots, clump toward me. I have a preliminary look at the temple, exchange smiles with the workers, and enter a tiny hall to have tea. The staphi preparing it smiles shyly. He is wearing, a woolen Australian football cap. I comment upon the seeming incongruity between a hereditary temple builder and an indigenous and extremely vigorous sport barely 100 years old. Dr. Shanmuganathan informs me that he umpires local cricket matches and takes a passing interest in football. He says, "I have lent the craftsmen some of my winter clothes. Perhaps some of us are still a bit shy about living in Australia. Despite the problems we have had from some people in establishing our temple. I would say that we have generally been received with warmth and public support."

A consulting engineer, a man who works as town planner with a local city council, discusses aspects of the temple with the committee. No, he is not a Hindu, and he doesn't want his name mentioned, but says he is an Australian interested in fostering community relations.

Dr. Shanmuganathan, President of the Sangam, takes me to a comfortably appointed brick house at the rear of the temple. "Once the temple is complete, this house will become the pujari's residence," he says. I comment that they were fortunate to obtain a home so close to the temple. My most chuckles, "The previous owner decided to move. He told us that he didn't want to go outside every day and

look at some Indian monstrosity."

Indeed, lack of acceptance from the adjacent community has been a major problem. The Sangam acquired the site, which contained a long disused Anglican church, in April 1989. When it was decided to demolish it and erect a traditional Hindu temple instead, some neighbors opposed the plans, asserting that a temple would degrade the bushland character of the suburb. I observe that the temple, on the contrary, seems to blend well with the mountain environment. "You can see how out of character we really are," states my host dryly, gesturing at several nondescript neighboring structures." Residents have waged a prolonged campaign, claiming that the temple would disturb the peace, create traffic congestion and litter, and destroy solitude - all camouflage, according to committee members. "The simple truth is, they want us here," says Shanmuganathan bluntly. "They fear we will proselytize, and most what they have heard about Hinduism is rumor fed by popular misconceptions." Several offers to meet with "aggrieved neighbors" were rejected, and although the local council proved cooperative and helpful, work on the site was held up by a series of time-consuming appeals to the building tribunal. Final approval hung on the fate of several trees which residents claimed were integral to the local ecology. The tribunal decided in favor of the Sangam, commenting favorably upon plans to landscape and enhance the bushland setting of the temple site.

The staphathis arrived in February and were initially accommodated in the community hall. The problems continued. Youths hurled stones onto the roof of the hall each night, and Sangam members had to take turns in sleeping with the disturbed craftsmen.

The day prior to my visit, the committee held a barbecue on the site, to which all residents in the surrounding area had been invited. "You can imagine how we felt, holding a barbecue on our own property," says Dr. Shanmuganathan, "but we believed we would be somehow failing unless we had made every effort to establish good relations with our neighbors, at least allay their fears." The results were disappointing; only one family attended, and another sent apologies.

Membership of the Vinayagar Hindu Sangam comprises about 200 families, mostly Tamil in origin, who have migrated from a number of countries, but mainly from Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore. Prior to the purchase of the temple site, the Sangam held meetings, bhajans and pujas, normally 5 or 6 times each month, in

various locations, but mostly at a local high school.

The site was acquired through public subscription, at a cost of US \$100,000. The temple itself will cost US \$300,000, to be raised by Sangam members. The Sangam has established three categories of membership. Temple trustees are those who have made donation of US \$15,000, life membership is acquired by contributing US \$3,500, while ordinary members each pledge US \$700. "Most of our members are professionals or self-employed with above average incomes. They are aware that their commitment is helping to lay the foundations for Hinduism in this country for generations to come, and that it requires sacrifice," said Dr. Shanmuganathan.

The Sangam plans to dedicate the Vinayagar temple on 11 October, through this date depends upon progress made through the wet Melbourne winter. A number of prominent Victorian personalities, including state and federal politicians will be invited. Once the temple is complete, the Sangam plans to develop the community hall into an education and cultural complex containing a library and a classroom for religious instruction.

The Sangam had employed a pujari, but he recently left to take up a position in Malaysia. They are now sponsoring the migration of a pujari who has lived in Canada for several years, and who might thus be expected to readily adapt to Australian conditions.

What of the future of Hinduism in Australia? Dr. Shanmuganathan is optimistic. "I think many Westerners are searching for alternatives. The high level of Western interest in the recent visit of the Dalai Lama seems to indicate that. And where else in the world could you live this free of racial country. This cultural mix will be increasingly common in the future. We hope our children will blend the finest in our Hindu heritage with the best that Australia has to offer. This temple is merely the start of that process."

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