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Breathing Life Into Gods, and Into a Hindu Temple



Christian Hansen for The New York Times

Members of the Staten Island Hindu Temple put valuables below the areas where deities will sit.

By **ANDY NEWMAN**
Published: May 26, 2008

Correction Appended

In the new temple's sanctum early Sunday morning, everything was in place: the coconuts, the red strings, the Post-It notes, all connected to the white marble statues of Shiva, Durga, Hanuman and the rest of the Hindu gods and goddesses lining the walls. All that remained was for the devotees to breathe life into them.

"The deities are there, but right now they're just sculptures," said Ram Nair, a temple trustee. "The power isn't invoked in them yet. In a couple of hours, it will be."

For Staten Island's growing Hindu population, a couple of hours more was not long to wait to finally have its own major temple. After 10 years of worship in private homes and community meeting halls and the not-quite-finished structure of the temple itself on Victory Boulevard, the Staten Island Hindu Temple was formally consecrated in a clangorous three-day ceremony that ended on Sunday.

For the 500 Hindu families from all over India who live scattered across the island, the days of having to travel to Queens or Edison, N.J., to worship are over.

"This has been a true blessing for our community," said Rajiv S. Gowda, a civil engineer and City Council candidate — Staten Island's first from South Asia. He added, "This is a temple that was built from scratch."

The temple, just north of a Staten Island Expressway exit near the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, is in a pleasant lot where a house used to lie. Next door is a rambling house with

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an “Irish Welcome” doormat. The Dermaplastic Arts Building, home of the Laser Liposuction Rejuvenation Center, sits on the other side. Across busy Victory Boulevard is the Clove Lake Park skating rink.

On Sunday morning inside the temple building, a sandstone-colored cinder-block structure that awaits further decoration, the sanctum began to fill with men and women chanting and praying.

They faced a display of 108 coconut pots, each resting in a golden vessel filled with water. Red strings tied to some of the vessels led up to the ceiling and across the room to the mini-shrines called mandapams, each of which housed statues of gods. Post-its on the red threads labeled their destinations — Hanuman, the monkey god, representing devotion; Saraswati, goddess of knowledge, playing a lute-like instrument called a veena, and half a dozen others.

The devotees’ prayers, explained Dhira Chaitanya, the temple’s religious teacher, travel through the coconuts, up the threads and into the statues, animating them. The idea, he explained, is to connect the worshiper to the infinite, represented by the water vessel, and the infinite to its tangible, visible emissaries: the statues of the gods.

“The Lord is infinite and has infinite manifestations,” said Dr. Chaitanya, a semi-retired physician. “We have to have many manifestations to look upon the infinite.”

Several worshipers said that watching the consecration ceremony gave them a new appreciation of the religion they had grown up in.

“When you attend ceremonies like this, it’s what allows you to understand the rituals,” said Rani Nair, 36, an occupational therapist (and no relation to Ram Nair). “This teaches you that there is a significance behind each and every tradition, so that it’s not just dogma.” For instance, she said, “When you connect these threads to the pots, you’re providing a channel to connect the force of God into the idol through that medium. That is something I didn’t know.”

The pace of the ceremony began to accelerate; the chanting grew louder, the bells and drums went faster. A priest in a white robe lighted an oil fire in a foil chafing pan and put a coconut in the center of it. The red threads were cut. Worshipers applauded.

They filed downstairs, most with coconuts in hand, and paraded around the outside of the building, led by a shirtless priest wearing a glass-bead necklace and carrying an extra-large coconut vessel on his head. Someone held a bright fabric umbrella over the priest’s head. Someone else pelted his vessel with flowers.

“Not everybody gets a chance to be part of a temple consecration in their lifetime; temples aren’t build very often,” said Samala Swamy, the co-chairman of the temple. “If this were to happen in India, only a few affluent fortunate rich could afford to be part of it.” Staten Island’s Hindus are a fairly prosperous lot — the temple was thick with doctors and engineers and business owners — but the ceremony was open to all.

Around 2 p.m., temple priests and elders removed curtains in front of the statues and re-revealed the gods, now clothed in elaborate costumes spun with gold thread and adorned with gold crowns and jewelry. Hanuman sported a heavy costume-diamond necklace. Durga, a warrior goddess seated atop a lion, held a new gold trident in one of her eight hands.

“These deities are not statues anymore,” Dr. Swamy said. “They are live gods.” To maintain them, devotees will have to make offerings to them twice a day, seven days a week. “It’s a big responsibility for the community,” Dr. Swamy said.

He paused and added, “I thank God I could be part of this.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

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Correction: June 2, 2008

An article in some editions last Monday about the consecration of the first major Hindu temple on Staten Island misidentified the geographical region that is the home of Rajiv S. Gowda, a City Council candidate from Staten Island who called the temple “a true blessing for our community.” Mr. Gowda’s home country, India, is in South Asia — not Southeast Asia.

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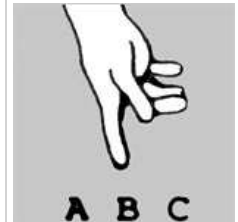
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