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# Temple Traffic a Mixed Blessing

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## Congregation's Growth Causes Parking Crisis And Threatens Closure

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On a cool marble altar lined with gold-haloed Hindu deities dressed in peacock blue robes, a Hindu priest traces the outline of each statue with the flame of an oil lamp, chanting in Sanskrit and ringing a golden bell. He has already offered pure water. And soon he will gently fan each one with an elaborate whisk made of long, gray yak tail.

"We fan the deities because in India it is so hot," explained Rajeev Khanna. "The idea is, you take care of us, we want you to be comfortable."

This twice-daily ritual -- three times on Sunday -- is called Aarti. It is critical for the care and feeding of the gods in any Hindu temple. It is also key to understanding why this temple, Rajdhani Mandir, in suburban [Fairfax County](#), is having so much trouble with its neighbors.

The issue is not religion, race or immigration.

It's parking.

And unless you understand Aarti, you will not understand why something as prosaic as county zoning regulations have become a lightning rod for cultural misunderstanding, with accusations of paranoia and xenophobia being thrown about. The situation has become so volatile that county leaders threatened last week to shut down the temple if members don't get the parking under control, temple leaders said.

The problem is this: The high-tech boom and explosion in immigrants coming to the D.C. area from India have pushed the number of devotees coming to the temple far beyond anything the original builders could have imagined when they began constructing a temple for 250 people in 1998. So, with only 87 parking spaces and sometimes hundreds if not thousands of worshipers coming and going throughout the day, many wind up parking in the neighborhood, residents say, blocking driveways and intersections, making unsafe U-turns and clogging two-lane Pleasant Valley Road. Neighbors have complained to the county so often that some have been asked not to write again. They have even sent photos and videos of cars parked on grass and sari-clad pedestrians walking in the street at night.

"My backyard is adjacent to the temple's side lot, and I have for a very long time

been overwhelmed by the parking in front of my house," Mary Ann Cox wrote to county officials. "I find it difficult to pull into my driveway anytime near sunset, especially on Thursdays and most especially on full-moon nights."

Thursday evenings, the fast-growing Sai Baba sect comes to worship. And many major Hindu festivals are timed to coincide with the full moon.

The neighbors and some county officials think the answer for the temple is simple: Move.

"What happens to every other church when its congregation outgrows its church? They usually find a new location and build a new church," said Scott Miller, a defense contractor and neighborhood resident who has complained regularly and bitterly about temple traffic and parking. "It happens to churches all the time. There's nothing weird about this. They're too successful. Which is a wonderful thing."

Indeed, Rajdhani Mandir is a victim of its own success. Unlike the three or four other Hindu temples in the D.C. area that cater only to one major deity or one region of India, Rajdhani, which means "capital," welcomes everyone.

But the suggestion of moving is, "insulting" at minimum and "repugnant" at worst, one temple official says.

They can't move.

The 17 deities that sit serenely in alcoves around the maroon sanctuary hall are alive.

"They've been enlivened in a process we call prana pratishta," Khanna, a doctor and chairman of the temple's board of trustees, explained. "Once the stone statues are transformed into living deities, they are rooted to the spot. They can never be moved. That's why there are temples in India that are 2,000 years old."

And that's why priests daily perform the Aarti, which literally feeds and cares for the gods, washing some with milk and chanting prayers in Sanskrit: "Har Har Mahadev." (God is great.)

It's not as if the temple isn't trying to solve its parking problems. Leaders say they typically spend \$2,000 for each of 12 to 15 religious festivals to hire off-duty police officers who direct traffic, to erect an electronic sign warning members not to park in the neighborhood and to offer a shuttle service from a nearby office park. They publish warnings on their Web site and in newsletters asking worshipers not to park in the neighborhood.

They also bought an acre next door and submitted plans to the county last July to reconfigure the space for 359 parking spaces. "We are really trying to find a solution," Khanna said. "We want to be good neighbors."

But in a zoning and culture clash Catch-22, plans that might solve most of the parking problems have been put on hold. The temple already is technically in violation of its original permit because it agreed to supply adequate parking for worshipers on-site. And there is a deep distrust among residents about the temple's plans.

The temple has a contingency contract on 33 acres across the street and is studying the feasibility of building a community center with more parking. But neighbors see this as an unwarranted expansion that would further snarl traffic. For that reason, many are opposing the one-acre parking lot.

County officials warned temple leaders at a meeting Friday that one more violation, meaning even one more person parking in the neighborhood, could be sufficient grounds to take the temple to court to shut it down, Khanna said. Barring new violations for 30 to 60 days, county officials said they would help expedite meetings with the community and begin reviewing the new parking lot plan, according to temple leaders.

Yesterday, a harried Gurtej Singh stood in the temple parking lot in a bright yellow reflective jacket and handed out directions to satellite parking. His two cars, an Isuzu Trooper and a [Toyota Sienna](#), outfitted with flashing lights on top, are the shuttle service. Some worshipers, wearing bright saris and long dhotis, themselves in a rush to get to the temple for Onam, a major festival for southern Indians honoring the god Hari-Hara Putra, ignored him. "This one has circled three times," an exasperated Singh said, pointing to a blue [Sonata](#).

One block away in the neighborhood, as some residents mowed their lawns or weeded gardens, a woman in large sunglasses and a bright blue sari quickly parked her car and hurried up the sidewalk to the temple. Across the street, someone had posted a sign with bright red, emphatic letters: "Please No Temple Parking Here."

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