

A Hindu Temple in Cary ^[1]

Behind ranch homes in a quiet suburban neighborhood, an ornate South Indian temple is rising from the ground.

The Sri Venkateswara Temple stands in sharp contrast to the modest, uninspiring architecture that surrounds it. But it speaks to the aspirations of many in the Triangle's growing Hindu community.

Well-educated and prosperous, local Hindus wanted to reproduce here in North Carolina the grandeur and minutely detailed artwork of Indian temple architecture.

Now numbering an estimated 21,000, the Triangle's Indian community has doubled in size since 2000, and the Hindus among them are intent on practicing their faith with all the proper trappings.

To celebrate the opening, temple leaders have invited as many as 10,000 guests, including U.S. politicians, to a opening ceremony and consecration May 24-28. The highly ritualized event is expected to cost \$1 million.

The idea is not just to throw a lavish party.

Temple consecrations are holy events that many Hindus may never have occasion to witness.

"It gives us a sense of identity, because there was not a place like this before," said Durga Nagulpally of Raleigh, a software engineer.

During the ceremony, a 9-foot, 2-ton statue of Sri Venkateswara will be installed on an altar in its own special niche, called a sanctorum. Sri Venkateswara is a powerful form of Vishnu, the supreme God, preserver and protector of the world. During the ceremony, the statue will be dressed in vibrant textiles with adornments made of silver, gold and copper, all from India. Priests will orchestrate devotions.

Eight smaller deities will also be installed during the ceremony.

"Hindus believe there are many paths to God," said Afroz Taj, director of the Center for South Asian Studies, a collaborative that includes Duke, N.C. State and UNC-Chapel Hill. "They believe in one God that can take many forms."

No time to waste

To prepare for the dedication, 14 artisans from India, in addition to local construction crews, are working around the clock to complete the elaborate cement moldings. The floor of the \$3.5 million temple is being laid with black granite.

Nand Gopal Sachdeva, a 68-year-old engineer, is the main builder. Sachdeva was building homes in Maryland until he was diagnosed with lymphoma in 2002 and came to the Triangle to receive treatment and be near his son, a physician. For the past two years he's been working doggedly on the temple construction, which he is doing free of charge. He even traveled to India to better study temple architecture.

"I'm thoroughly convinced that by keeping busy it's keeping him in remission right now," said Sachdeva's son, Neeraj, a Raleigh gastroenterologist.

Temple building is considered an ancient science in India for which there are rules and regulations in sacred texts called the Vedas. The Sri Venkateswara temple is modeled after a temple by the same name outside Tirupathi in the state of Andhra Pradesh. There are Sri Venkateswara temples in Bridgewater, N.J., Pittsburgh and Chicago.

Place to meditate, pray

Unlike churches, synagogues, or mosques, Hindu temples don't hold formal services, except on special occasions. Instead, people drop in over the course of the day to say their devotions, meditate, and pray.

The Triangle has one other large Hindu temple in Morrisville, but it is more eclectic in its traditions. When it was founded in 1986, members overlooked regional worship styles and filled out a questionnaire, choosing their favorite deity among Hinduism's dozens -- a practice unheard of in India.

Now that South Indians are more numerous in the Triangle, they want a temple that will correspond more faithfully to the traditions of their home region. The intricate structure is intended to resemble the human body. The entrance represents the feet. The two sides of the temple represent the hands, and the top of the temple the head.

For many Hindus, the temple represents a coming of age.

The largest wave of Hindus began arriving in the U.S. after a 1965 immigration law removed the national origins quota

system, allowing Asians to immigrate more freely. By the 1970s, Hindu American temple construction had begun.

California and New York state were the first destinations for large numbers of Hindus. Today, Texas, Florida, and Georgia are fast on their heels.

Just 2.5 acres to start

In the Triangle, plans for the Sri Venkateswara temple began in 1998, when a local couple bought a 2.5-acre plot in Cary, where so many Indian immigrants live. Seven additional acres were eventually added, and a private driveway onto the property was built. A clapboard home already on the property served as a makeshift altar and education center.

These days, the temple has grown to employ six priests. It runs a Sunday school for children at Cedar Forks Elementary School in Morrisville.

Taj, who teaches South Asian languages, literature, and culture at UNC-CH, said the community is thriving.

An e-mail list he runs goes out to 15,000 members. There are an estimated 60 South Asian associations in the Triangle, a monthly magazine called "Saathie," and a TV and radio presence.

"It's a very diverse and multicultural community," Taj said. "There's something going on every day."

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