

Story and Photos by Randy Mallory

# SRI MEENAKSHI TEMPLE

During the last 30 years, tens of thousands of people from India immigrated to Texas cities, especially Houston. The resulting Indian restaurants, shops, groceries, and performing arts groups added a rich cultural heritage to an already diverse population.

While many faiths find followers in the Indo-American community, Hinduism, the predominant religion of India, attracts the most devotees. Eager to carry on revered religious and architectural traditions, Hindus built several temples in or near the Bayou City. Visit the largest of these temples, located in Pearland just south of Houston, and you'll experience what amounts to a peaceable bit of India along the upper Texas Coast.

As you leave Pearland headed south on McLean Road, the setting seems typical enough--a shopping center, new subdivisions, a busy park, and a scattering of older homes and trailer houses. Then, a couple of miles down the narrow lane, one of the nation's largest traditional Hindu temples, Sri Meenakshi Temple, rises abruptly from the flat coastal plains as if a mirage from a faraway land.

Cream-colored towers jut from a massive walled courtyard as high as 55 feet into the blue Texas sky. Hundreds of intricate concrete sculptures cover the tapering towers with tiers of pillared pavilions, swirling fan-shaped designs, and detailed figures from Hindu mythology. Skillful Indian artisans, most descended

from a long line of temple builders, spent months in Texas handcrafting the elaborate ornamentation.

Midway on each side of the courtyard's rectangular wall, a tower, or *gopuram*, looms above a wrought-iron gateway. The four towers mark the cardinal points of the compass--east, west, south, and north.

Beneath the western tower, visiting college students remove their shoes (a required sign of respect before entering a sacred Hindu place), then pass into the temple grounds curious about the meaning of all they see. (3)

Guide Beth Kulkarni, a member of the temple's board of directors, begins her explanation with an introduction to Hinduism--one of the world's oldest religions, which developed in India over a period of thousands of years. (1, p. 529; 8) "Like Christians, Jews, and Muslims, Hindus worship one God. We may perceive that one God in different ways, however, finding it helpful to have a concrete form on which to concentrate during worship," she says. (Kulkarni; 11; 8; 3; 4, p. 36)

At the temple these "concrete forms" take the shape of nine highly-adorned sacred statues (*vigrahas*) carved in southern India from black granite. They represent major deities selected for the temple from among countless deities worshipped in the Hindu pantheon. (4, p. 23; interviews) And, for devotees, the statues--mainly human-like figures--symbolize universal aspects of God.

Resident Hindu priests from India ceremoniously installed the statues beginning with the first one in 1979 and continuing throughout the temple's 20-year history. The priests care for the *vigrahas* according to rituals written in ancient sacred texts called *agamas*. (interviews; 9; 4, p. 63; 11, p.80; 5) The rituals involve, among other things, chanting Sanskrit prayers taken from Hindu

scriptures called Vedas. The priests also make offerings to the deities, such as flowers, fruit, and incense. (Kulkarni)

"While temples in India may have just one deity, we're one of the few places in the world with such a diversity of deities," Beth tells the group. "We did this in order to bring all the Hindu devotees in this area together into one community."

Strolling along red and gray brick walkways and across green lawns, Beth points out four open-air pillared halls (*mandapams*), one in each corner of the courtyard, in which Hindus believe deities reside. In the center of the courtyard rests the main temple. It's a large, flat-roofed structure with three domed towers standing side by side at one end in a striking architectural trinity. Directly beneath the towers sit shrines of the three major deities of Sri Meenakshi Temple-Shiva, Meenakshi, and Vishnu.

Beth directs the group up the steps of the main temple and into its dimly-lit chamber. On one side of the far end stands a two foot tall *lingam*, a simple stone shape representing Sri Sundaeswara (Lord Shiva), the destroyer and recreator. On the other side stands a six foot tall statue of Sri Venkateswara (Lord Vishnu), the sustainer, represented by a four-armed male figure resplendent with silver ornaments. In the middle rests the temple's colorfully-adorned presiding deity, Sri Meenakshi, a four and one-half foot tall female figure symbolizing power, energy, and nature. (14)

Sri Meenakshi resides in a recessed darkened inner sanctum known as *Garba Griha* (womb-house). This sacred site, like sacred sites the world over, bears special significance, says Asok Sen Mungara, a Houston architect involved for years in various Sri Meenakshi Temple projects. "There's a special mystery and meaning to temple design, similar to that of the great medieval cathedrals of

Europe. But while cathedrals were built for congregational worship on a grand scale, the temple is scaled for individual or family worship.

"The flow of entry into the main temple--from the large outdoors to the small inner sanctum--is symbolic of discarding worldliness and moving to spiritual enlightenment. The culmination of the experience comes as the devotee sees the fleeting image of the deity, lit in this darkened space by the light of a priest's oil lamp. That experience is called *darshana*, or the vision of God."

(Mungara; 14; 3)

Throughout the day and evening, devotees come and go. Some request the services of a priest who performs a short worship ceremony (*pooja*) for them. Others bow and pray on their own before the deities. They often ring a bell before approaching each shrine to announce their presence and to benefit from the sound. (Hindus believe that certain sound vibrations have positive physical and spiritual effects.) (3, pp. 12-22; 12; interviews)

Similar bells ring on the other side of the globe at another Sri Meenakshi Temple. Built in the 17th century in Madurai in the state of Tamil Nadu, this temple remains one of India's largest and most elaborate. (3; 7, p. 573; 6; 9; Mungara) It served as a model for a smaller, less ornate namesake temple which 29 families decided in 1977 to found near Houston.

"First we built a small temple for Sri Ganesha, the remover of obstacles, to whom Hindus pray before starting any new task," says temple administrator, P. Ramalingam. "Then, over the years, we expanded our property from five to 17 acres and added the main sanctums and the towers."

Two of India's most prominent temple architects--Padmasri S.M. Ganapathy Sthapathi and Padmasri Muthiah Sthapathi--designed Pearland's Sri Meenakshi Temple in the Dravidian style characteristically found in south India. They designed the temple according to ancient texts on architecture called

*shastras*. (13; 9) "Religious principles dictate strict guidelines for Hindu temple plans and structural proportions, similar to what you find in Greek temples," says architect Mungara, "but the decorative elements vary with the creativity of the architect." (4 p. 72; 9; Mungara)

Mungara designed the temple's most recent addition, a grand hall (*kalyanamatapam*), which hosts weddings and other social and cultural events. In Pearland, as in India, the temple serves as the focus of Hindu community life. (12; 4 p. 49; Mungara)

"Those of us who started the temple grew up in India with our Hindu rituals as an accepted part of life, but our kids grew up in Houston," says temple chairman Sam Kannappan. "We hope the temple will encourage them to continue their religious and cultural heritage and help them live according to *Dharma*, the Hindu code of life," adds Sam, who came to Texas in the late 1960s in the first wave of mostly student immigrants from India.

A second wave, mostly doctors and engineers, came during the 1970s, an era of U.S. shortages in those fields, says K.G. Malhodra, vice-consul at Houston's Consulate of India. More recently, shortages of computer experts attracted programmers from India, adds Malhodra, who estimates that 55,000 Indians live in the Houston area. (He says another 40,000 or so live in other Texas cities--chiefly Dallas, Fort Worth, and Austin.)

Catering to a growing population from India and other South Asian nations, a host of businesses sprang up, especially in southwest Houston. Dozens of Indian and Pakistani restaurants, groceries, and jewelry and clothing shops cluster along Hillcroft and Bissonnet Streets near U.S. 59 (Southwest Freeway). (*Giri; Koshy; Nagar*) Three weekly newspapers--Indo American News, Voice of Asia, and India Herald--circulate news of readers' past and present homelands. Sports-minded South Asians root for their favorite cricket

teams at regular matches played between local players from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), and other countries.

Movie fans flock to two theaters--Funplex Cinema III and West Bellfort Cinemas--for Indian films in Hindi. The long-running show, *Music of India*, hosted by Meena Datt, airs on Saturdays on radio station KELR/1070-AM, broadcasting songs accompanied by traditional Indian instruments such as sarods, tambouras, harmoniums, tablas, and sitars. (Nagar; Giri; Koshy; 10)

In addition, in Houston and elsewhere, a handful of studios teach classical Indian dance. Their productions often tell stories from epic Hindu tales, such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, by using symbolic hand and body movements and subtle facial expressions. (10, Kumar) In 1975 Rathna Kumar, a classical dancer from India, opened what she believes was the first Indian dance studio in Texas. "I felt that being in Houston would offer me so many opportunities that I should give something back. I started Anjali Center for Indian Performing Arts as a special offering to my new home. We often dance at the temple, which is the social and cultural center for the community, as well as a place for prayer. Art and life are interlinked in our traditions." Uma Bharathi Kosuri, Padmini Chari, and a few other teachers also maintain dance schools.

Those shared traditions unfold vividly throughout the year at a profusion of religious festivals held at Sri Meenakshi Temple. Several New Year's Day celebrations occur throughout the year for Hindus, depending on when they're commemorated in different regions of India. One takes place on the January 1. But another popular such event, held in autumn, is Deepavali (or Divali), also known as Festival of Lights, in which Hindus decorate their homes and temples with lights as a symbol of good (light) winning over evil (darkness). It's also the major gift-giving holiday for many Hindus. Sri Meenakshi Temple holds a

colorful bazaar during the festival, with clothing and other gifts for sale.

(Kulkarni; 1, p. 349; 14; 15)

Many temple festivals feature group worship led by priests reciting Sanskrit scriptures and ceremonially bathe deities being honored. The bathing, which begins and ends with water, may feature milk, yogurt, and honey--all costly ingredients in India where such rituals began as a way of showing respect and affection for the deities. Festivals also include group processions which always move clockwise around the main temple. They're typically comprised of women in colorful saris and men carrying small statues of deities made of a special five-metal alloy. Indian dance, music, and foods sometimes enhance these traditional festivals. (Kulkarni)

When visitors from India come to the temple for festivals or worship, they can't believe their eyes, says tour guide Beth Kulkarni. "What they experience here makes them feel like they're back home again."

Author and lecturer on India, Robert Arnett, couldn't agree more. His recent award-winning book of essays and photographs, *India Unveiled*, chronicles his 18-month odyssey studying India's art, culture, and religions. "Physically, Sri Meenakshi Temple looks very much the way temples look in southern India. But it's the spirit of the place that really impresses me. It surrounds you with a perceptible, peaceful feeling like what you experience in a beautiful natural setting such as a forest," he says. "And the spirit of the people at the temple...they're so devoted and proud of the authentic tradition they're carrying on in Texas."

Indeed, that spirit beckons to visitors of all faiths through sculpture-clad towers, highly-adorned statues, and lively festivals. Down a narrow lane along the upper Texas coast, Sri Meenakshi Temple comes as a jewel of a surprise.

