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The Hindu Gods in a Split-Level World

The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in Suburban Washington, D.C.

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A "country" mailbox, metal encased in wood, stands on the road in front of an archetypal suburban split-level house. Wrought iron letters read SSVT. Behind this symbol of American family life rise the ornate *vimanas* or spires of the largest Hindu temple in the United States. The temple stands on fourteen acres of former Maryland farmland at the edge of the sprawling suburbs of the nation's capital. Its congregation is made up of the first generation of a new wave of immigrants. Neither tired nor poor nor huddled masses, the technological and scientific elite of India began coming to the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when changes in the immigration laws removed odious restrictions against Asians. Unlike immigrants from the past who began their life on American shores far lower on the occupational hierarchy, these educated newcomers quickly prospered and chose to settle in the suburbs, new cities, and edge cities, among their colleagues from major technological corporations, hospitals, and universities.

The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple is located on Cipriano Road, the local route to the NASA Goddard Space Center less than a mile away. It shares the road with two churches. Just next door is another split-level used by a gospel study group, the Victory World Outreach. Another house, now used as a Hindu temple for those devoted more exclusively to the god Murugan, is in the vicinity. Homes in this neighborhood range from the modest 1950s ranch styles typical of the first suburban inroads onto this once-virgin Maryland farmland to newer and larger split-level subdivisions. A garden apartment complex and modern new industrial buildings now impinge on the large tracts of farmland that remain within two miles of this fast-growing outpost of metropolitan Washington. On Saturday mornings, East Asian Americans, African Americans, and European Americans can be seen mowing their lawns. Cipriano Road reflects a multilayered suburban community with an economic, racial, and ethnic mix that reflects its

layers of growth. Lanham, Maryland, is united only, it seems, by its middle-class ethos marked by good fences, good houses, and the good jobs that make home ownership a reality.

Indians around Washington, as in other parts of the country, ¹ have not settled in any one neighborhood, although Arlington and Silver Springs do have a larger proportion of South Asians than other areas. The only temple located near a "little India" is, not surprisingly, in New York City. The Hindu Temple Society of North America created the first temple in the United States in the early 1970s by reconstructing an old Greek Orthodox church in Flushing, now down the road from an Indian shopping center that functions less as a residential neighborhood than as a center of commerce. The larger Hindu temples built in the last two decades, however, rise from suburban landscapes convenient to major interstate highways in Pittsburgh, Houston, Boston, Chicago, and Nashville. The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple, like other major American Hindu temples, is in many ways both more incongruous with its particular environment and yet more a part of the generic mainstream American landscape than older religious centers in the many Little Italies, Little Polands, and Chinatowns that anchor ethnic space in the inner cities.

Unlike the earlier waves of immigrants at the turn of the century, many of these recent arrivals left urban environments in India that better prepared them for life in the United States. Many Indians came here from middle-class homes—not affluent, but fluent in English and familiar with the business-suit world of modern urban commerce inherited from two hundred years of British rule. The parents or even the grandparents of migrants especially from South India who make up the majority of the trustees and devotees of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple belonged in India to the mobile and multilingual civil service, university, and scientific communities. The traditional ties that bound persons to particular places in India had been severed, then, a generation earlier in the families of many of the new Indian Americans. In urban centers such as Madras and Bangalore, *enka ur*, "our town," is usually somewhere away from *enka vitu*, "our house." Many Indians, certainly many of those most active in the SSVT, came to the United States already "twice-migrated,"² with a history of displacement: a heritage of multiple meanings for "our land," "our home," and "our place" in the world.

This pattern of "double migration," however, is complicated by the two decades of rapid technological change (1960s-1980s) that brought many of the earliest Indian immigrants to the United States, often as agents of that change. They moved with their degrees from India's institutes of technology and schools of medicine to highly specialized jobs at institutions such as NASA, at university research institutes and hospitals, or at

large corporations such as IBM and Burroughs-Wellcome.³ But in this postmodern era, the technology that lured them from India at the same time holds them close to each other and to the mother country through a global network of telephones, modems, jetliners, and now international newspapers, including *Hinduism Today*, *India Today*, *Accent*, and *The Indian-American*. Under the headline "Trend to Watch," *Hinduism Today*, published in California, proudly quoted Joel Kotkin's forecast in *Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy*: "The more than twenty million overseas Indians today represent one of the best-educated, affluent groupings in the world. . . . The Indian may prove to be the next diaspora to emerge as a great economic force."⁴ This newspaper, which proclaims its task as "Recording the Modern History of Nearly a Billion Members of a Global Religion in Renaissance," touted the suggestion that a tight network of the Indian "tribe" in the new global village may be the key to its success in this age of transnational economics.

But as prepared as Indian Americans may be to take up their role as the newest diaspora, an ideology of journey and wandering was never at the heart of their ancient culture. Unlike the Jews, who are often mentioned by Indian Americans as a model for economic acculturation with continuing community cohesion,⁵ Indians have been conquered but never force-fully driven from their soil. The gods of the Hindus, unlike the Lord God of Israel, have no strong tradition of moving about in a tent for their dwelling⁶ or of residing solely inside their holy word: they live in temples. Thus over the last decade, many of the most successful of the new "tribe" of overseas Indians—many now American citizens—have given the money derived from their great success along with their boundless energy to once again construct "authentic" Hindu temples that nonetheless stand on a highly complex space that is at once American, Indian, and global, but at the same time also middle-class and suburban. The Hindu gods of metropolitan Washington, D.C., like the Hindu gods of the cities of Houston or Pittsburgh or Nashville, live in a substantive holy house that nonetheless *is* and yet *is not* at home on the land on which it stands.

Middle-Class and Hindu: An Indian Matrix, a Global Context, an American Venue

Indian Americans at the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple, like others in this new diaspora, express a continuing bond to the mother country. Some equation of their Hinduism with India always remains. But at the same time, these diaspora Indians openly acknowledge that they felt forced to

leave this mother as too old, too tired, and too slow to nurture the ambition and the skills that so many possessed. When they differentiate America from India, India is the "spiritual and unchanging" place, while America is the land of "material" success, recently given the Sanskrit name *karmabhumi*, meaning "the land of action, the place of work." ⁷ At a classical Indian dance recital in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the early 1990s, a prominent Indian guru now settled in the United States told his largely Indian American audience that they should combine "the East with the West." From the West, said the guru, they could learn "punctuality, and how to succeed materially." Implied, of course, was that the East held all the cultural riches. Yet in spite of the continued sense of deep kinship with family and old colleagues left behind, the particular character of the interconnection between India and its diaspora is, as Amitav Ghosh points out, "a very peculiar, almost inexplicable phenomenon."⁸

In an article written in 1989, Ghosh points to the curious lack of any real institutional structures that could unite India with overseas Indians. The economic links are insubstantial, the marriage ties weak, the political connections fragmented. Pointing to the international fame of diaspora writers such as V. S. Naipaul, A. K. Ramanujan, and Salman Rushdie, Ghosh instead suggests that the strongest cultural bonds are "lived within the imagination" in the space of literature. And, indeed, the construction of a "spiritual India" among many Indian Americans echoes the broad, often mystified sense of the homeland developed by the most famous of India's long-absent sons, Mahatma Gandhi, who spent his early career among Indian migrants in Africa. This imagined India is the *Area of Darkness* that Trinidadian V. S. Naipaul so stunningly contrasted with the shocking reality of his first "return" to the country he had never seen.⁹

However, very recent evidence of the rapidly developing institutions that now mediate between diaspora Indians and India, including political parties and organizations with a conservative religious message, suggests the rise of a more structured solidarity with the motherland. Conspicuously active in the United States is the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad, "World Hindu Council"), the religious wing of India's right-wing party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, "the Indian People's Party"). The VHP in 1993 sponsored "Global Vision 2000" in Washington, D.C., to celebrate Swami Vivekananda's famous presentation of Hinduism before the World Parliament of Religions in 1893.¹⁰ The event drew Indo-American enthusiasts, but also others protesting the disguised conservative agenda.¹¹ These same organizations are part of an increasing popular Hindu "fundamentalism" within India that defines Indians—over and against the "foreign" Christians and Muslims—as citizens *native* to the soil who put no other gods, no other holy places, before Bharat Mata, mother India. The *India Times*,

published in Washington, D.C., has become a voice for this new strident nationalism of some Indians, permanent residents of the United States and sometimes citizens, who nonetheless write editorials urging an electoral platform for the BJP that would create "India as a strong economic power . . . India as a strong military power . . . India as a nation with an unwavering sense of identity with the secular Vedic-Hindu civilization." ¹²

This very visceral attachment to the land arises from a definition of India as *the* Hindu nation whose "Vedic Hindu" civilization emanates so naturally from the soil that it should not be called "a religion" like the foreign-made Islam. Hence Hinduism is truly the "secular" civilization of India. This Hindu mother India now exists as another model of the home country among diaspora Indians alongside the more easily portable, less controversial "spiritual India" of art and sacred literature. So difficult and dense are these questions defining the place of so many of the world's most recent immigrants in this new age of global migration and multiple identities that the problem precipitated three new academic journals: *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*; *Transition: An International Review*; and *Public Culture: Bulletin of the Center for Transnational Cultural Studies*.

This ambiguity involved in defining a place for "India" in the Hindu-ism of the diaspora has much to do with the equally puzzling problem of defining the place of "Hinduism" within modern India, especially for the mobile, middle-class professionals who were the parents and are often the stay-at-home brothers and sisters of the new Indian Americans. While the BJP tries to forge an unbreakable link between Hinduism and India as a nation, the urban middle class has a history of a different solution to the sense of religious and personal dislocation felt in a new urban environment. The problem is complicated by the paucity of studies on religion among the urban middle class, whose workday habits in Bombay offices or Madras bureaucracies could never attract the anthropological eye away from the exotic and more dazzling bells and smoke-filled rituals of their country and tribal cousins. The available studies of modern trends in religion within India have tended to stress the ways that the modern middle class in India's new industrial cities adapted older forms of Hindu-ism to their own needs through what Max Weber first identified as the intensive emotional surrender to the charismatic guru, the divine teacher, which he assumed "quite naturally became the primary form of holy seeking for the aliterary middle classes."¹³

In *Redemptive Encounters*, Lawrence Babb investigated three modern religious movements in India's capital city of New Delhi that centered on founding saints. Babb found that disconnection between person and the daily place of residence or place of work in these movements was so

radical that "interactions with deities and deitylike persons" became "a way in which a very special sense of self and the world, which has little basis in the experience of everyday life, can be assimilated to a devotee's inner life."¹⁴ In describing the sense of community in one such movement formed around this common ethos of a split between inner and outer life and absolute belief in the founding spiritual teacher, Babb doubts if it can be called "a community in any normal sense because its territorial dispersion mitigates against the formation of anything resembling corporate ties. The group is probably best conceived as a loose 'congregation.'"¹⁵ The contemporary middle class in India, then, are not strangers to social and economic factors that demand a relocation—often a radical relocation—of the self in a seemingly fragmented world.

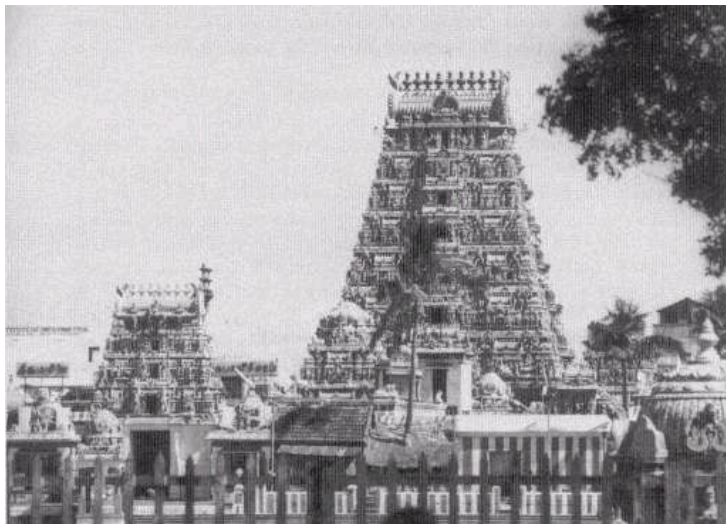
Several of these same guru-centered organizations have become international, and their "congregations" spread over the globe.¹⁶ For many middle-class Hindus in the United States, these guru-centered global communities continue to provide a sense of relocation and re-identification of the self with a spiritual network that connects—sometimes by telepathy or telephone, letter, or fax—the devout with the guru while transcending national boundaries.¹⁷ To fully understand where "India," "America," and "Britain" are on the map of their spiritual life is difficult, but one thing is certain: Where the guru is, there is holy space. However, the temple builders in Lanham, Maryland, or Flushing, New York, or Houston, Texas, by envisioning and constructing temples they consider authentic, have chosen to center their religious life in the temple itself, and therefore to adopt/adapt a tradition that has connected making a holy house with sanctifying the land.

Amid all the complexity of the place of "India" within diaspora Hinduism and the place of "Hinduism" within middle-class India stands the new Hindu temple in America as a marker of what John Fenton, in a study of South Asian immigrants to the United States, calls "the process of becoming at home (having a *desh* or place where one belongs) on the foreign soil of America."¹⁸ Other scholars of contemporary temple building in America verify the almost literal sense of the "transplantation" of Hinduism into American soil,¹⁹ and of the process that makes God "immediate; this land, holy."²⁰ But amid this process of implantation (the ceremony to consecrate a Hindu temple creates strong analogies between planting a seed and "planting" a temple) remain the shifting borders of modern life—the transfers and new assignments and career advances that necessitate continued mobility. The Hindu temple is in "America" and stands as a marker of the acceptance of a new place for the growth of Hinduism; but at the same time, this holy house cannot be easily associated with a new stable group of people now permanently (re)tied to this land. "America's"

place in the temple and the temple's place in America is a far more complex issue than the traditional place of the temple in India—even in modern India.

In *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan reminds his readers that "the original inspiration for building a city was to consort with the Cods." Cods live in traditional Hindu temples quite literally embodied in iconic form and firmly fixed in a specific locality. The most common words for temple in classic Sanskrit texts, according to Stella Kramrisch, are *vimāna*, "measured out," and *prasāda*, "seat." Both words emphasize the fixing, seating, settling of the divine in a constructed abode.²¹ The most familiar contemporary words for "temple" in both Sanskrit and vernacular languages translate as "palace," "house of God," "place of God," "abode of God." As S. S. Janaki puts it, "synonyms like *alayam*, *mandiram* and *grha* are in a general way applicable to the dwelling place of both human beings and divinities."²² The Indian city then continues as a place where humans and divine inhabitants share the same space—each in their own respective houses. Stella Kramrisch, in her now-classic study of the Hindu temple, quotes texts which state that the installation of divine icons in temples should be made "in forts; in auspicious cities, at the head of shop-lined streets."²³ And indeed in many of the still-living temple cities of South India, the most exclusive shops are located on the four streets that surround the urban temple complex, the *mada* streets. Here the finest silk weaving, the best brassware and jewelry can be found.

The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple, however, is not defined by the patterns of interconnected yet bounded communities that historians of modern India have described as characterizing Indian cities even at the turn of the century. The model of little villages within a larger urban corporation marked Indian cities until the mid-nineteenth century, when British residents of colonial port cities such as Madras began to move their personal residences from the trading and governmental centers to new garden suburbs.²⁴ The rising middle-class Indians in Madras city, for example, began to build new neighborhoods like their British overlords, but they always re-created an older Indian sense of urban space: a central temple surrounded by a combination of houses and stores. The Mylapore area of Madras is a perfect example of this older urban model that continues even today.²⁵ Only after independence in 1947 did Madras begin to create purely residential suburbs in the American sense of bedroom communities. In the Indian context, the oft-quoted maxim "Do not live where there is no temple" is taken seriously in the new suburbs, which have seen the rise of small temples built by new multi-caste and multi-ethnic constituencies that are within residential neighborhoods but no longer at their literal center.



2.1.

The Kapaleeswara Temple in Mylapore, Madras city. The complex is enclosed by a wall with grand gopura or gates, which are visible in front of a large water tank used for festivals.

In the new American context, devotees of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple have built and now maintain a multi-million-dollar temple complex that is even less the center of a new neighborhood than its Indian counterparts. They have moved one step beyond the Indian urban middle class. Their temple is not even contiguous to their residential neighborhood. The temple takes on even greater importance, then, as the only concrete embodiment of the community. Ironically, it rests on land in a non-Hindu neighborhood and yet remains the focal point for a Hindu community that itself has no clear edges except its sprawling middle-class suburbaness. There is as yet no obvious—visibly created and theoretically formulated—relationship between the space of the temple and the land of Maryland and the life that it supports. The "space" of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple exists somewhere amid the concreteness of the traditional temple, the ethereal space of "spiritual" India, the newer creation of an ideological

motherland, and the shifting space of the everywhere/nowhere/every-body's/nobody's split-level world of the migrating international middle class. Without acknowledgment and understanding of that conundrum, the *place* of the temple among Hindu Americans would be lost.

Suburban areas such as Lanham, Maryland, must not be ignored as an important environment for building newer dimensions to modern Hinduism. New Hindu temples in Boston, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Nashville rise up at the very edge of urban centers in the same way that new temples now complete the suburban landscape of Madras, Bangalore,²⁶ New Delhi, London,²⁷ Singapore,²⁸ Sydney,²⁹ and Durban.³⁰ Indeed, the same English-speaking and highly articulate architects trained at government-sponsored schools of religious architecture in Mahabalipuram outside Madras city and in the famous temple city of Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh have provided designs and guided the construction of new temples in suburban India and the United States. Thus the sacred homes built for these Hindu gods of the American city are at the same time a part of strongly contested definitions of an emerging global Hinduism. The questions of what is India-Indian, what is America-American, where *is* the temple and who belongs there are all written, I will argue, on the walls, into the design, and throughout the ritual life of this temple. Rather than debating the definition of Hinduism in a public forum, as does the VHP, or quietly setting aside a place in their minds or spirits for a new internalized Hinduism, as do many middle-class Indians, the patrons and devotees of this temple are finding and founding a place to shape their answers to this new "world of crisscrossed economies, intersecting systems of meanings, and fragmented identities," as an advertisement for the new journal *Diaspora* describes it.

Inside/Outside: The Modern Hindu Temple in a Suburban World

A carefully designed brochure used to solicit donations in 1989 for the first permanent building of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple provided a brief history of the temple along with construction plans, estimated costs, and an explanation of the organization of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple Trust:

The dream of setting up a Hindu Temple, in the Nation's Capital, where religious services are performed in the time-honored tradition, was conceived in January, 1980. The SRI SIVA-VISHNU (SSVT) TRUST was formed and registered in the state of Maryland for religious, educational and charitable purposes. The primary aim of the trust is to build and maintain an authentic Hindu temple for performing various religious functions.

The establishment of the trust was followed four years later by the purchase of a modest split-level house on four acres. The split-level became the first temple with the installation of the *balalaya*, literally the "baby" images—the wooden prototypes of the gods that would eventually be remade in stone and housed in the permanent temple. When the trust purchased the ten adjacent acres, plans for construction began in earnest under the direction of a famous *sthapati*, a traditional temple architect, Sri V. Ganapathi Sthapati, from an ancient center of traditional Hindu artisans, Mahabalipuram near Madras city. By September 26, 1990, the basic structure was finished and the final round of inspections completed on the very eve of this major celebration, as the November 1990 temple newsletter later divulged.

The first stone images of three of the fourteen gods and goddesses that the SSVT planned to install in the new temple had made the long journey from the sculptors in Madras to arrive in Lanham for the elaborate rituals of consecration—also, as I was later told, at the last moment. Priests from other Hindu temples in Albany, Los Angeles, and New York joined the resident priest on Cipriano Road for the four-day *pranapratishta* rituals which "fix" (*pratistha*) the "life breath" (*prana*) into the stone sculpture, transforming it from a work of art into a visible embodiment of a God.

I first saw the temple and met the trustees at this point as part of a visual documentation of contemporary temple rituals that my husband, photographer Dick Waghome, and I had started in Madras two years earlier. We have returned each summer since then to photograph and participate in a series of consecration rituals that have marked the growth of this temple.

On July 3-7, the first *mahakumbabhisekam* was carefully performed. The *vimanas*, the ornate spires that covered the sanctum of the major god Siva and his son Murugan, were sanctified along with the divine images of these deities by the pouring of holy water (*abhisekam*, "sprinkling") from a sacred vessel (*kumba*, "pot") simultaneously over the gold finial of the *vimana* and the divine image fixed in the chamber just below. On July 9-12, 1992, a second *mahakumbabhisekam* consecrated the *vimanas* and a monumental reclining stone image of Vishnu in his form as Padmanabha, the deity awaking from rest at the moment of creation. A new wing was added to the temple and dedicated to the God Venkateswara in the summer of 1993. The consecration ceremonies in 1993 were on Memorial Day weekend, May 28-30. Fundraising was already moving quickly to build a new wing on the temple to house an image of the God Aiyyappa. The cost of this temple in this early period exceeded two million dollars, as not only the deities but also extensive external ornamentation has been added by sculptors who have come and gone from Madras to Lanham in



2.2.

The chief priest pours water from a holy pot onto the top finial of the temple, which covers the main shrine at the moment. This is the final ritual act that consecrates the new temple.

continual rotation so that the bare cinderblock is now fully dressed in unmistakable Indian garb.

To anyone familiar with Hindu deities, the particular selection of gods and the general style of the temple would immediately reveal the South Indian origins of most of the trustees and the devotees of SSVT. Thus I, like the majority of the trustees, came to this temple from the context of the urban temples I have known in South India. As a steady migrant in the opposite direction over the last twenty years, I have lived in or near the neighborhoods from which many of the SSVT devotees came,



2.3.

The main entrance to the temple, with the new plaster ornamentation that now covers the modern construction. The stairs are covered with flowers to mark the day of the consecration ceremonies.

and I know families like theirs as neighbors and friends in Madras with cousins, brothers, sons, and daughters in America. We are all part of a generation of crisscrossings and multiple heres and theres. The detailed description that follows is grounded in this shared experience on two continents, the numerous conversations I have had here and there, and observations of similar rituals in suburban Madras and suburban Washing-ton, D.C.

On the first day of the scheduled activities for the week of July 4, 1991, when the second of the four-year cycle of consecration rituals occurred, the front yard in Lanham still held several crates containing the sacred stone sculptures of the temple's major deities, which had been

transported from the hands of their *silpis* (sculptors) in southern India to their new guardians in America. Several *silpis* had come from Madras prior to the sculptures' arrival to complete their installation in the temple as part of this five-day-long *mahakumbabhisekam* ritual, which would fully consecrate the images. The details of this July 4 week when the Hindu gods were fully manifest near the U.S. capital will serve as the text for a careful consideration of the nature of the space that was first sanctified that day.

The temple at this point still lacked its exterior decoration, thus exposing the basic form of its architecture. The temple's base unit is the traditional square, in this case 90 by 90 feet. The two stories, however, are



2.4.

The traditional architect of the temple, the famous Ganapathi Stapati, wears the three marks of the god Shiva on his forehead during the ceremony that honored his work.

very untraditional. The upper floor, which is actually on the ground level at the rear, houses the divine images; the lower story, which opens from the side to the parking lot in the front, contains a large auditorium for cultural performances, the dance and music that has long been part of Hindu temple practice. This central auditorium is ringed by a modern kitchen, restrooms, classrooms, a library, an office, and meeting rooms. Families gathered on the first day of the consecration week in the auditorium, eating lunch while keeping an eye on the video monitor that carried every moment of the ongoing five-day ritual in progress upstairs.

The board of trustees of this impressive religious institution expressed great pride that this temple was designed by one of India's leading temple architects, Sri Ganapathi Sthapati. "Sthapati" is a title borne by certain families who, like priests, know and control a special set of sacred texts that give careful guidelines as to the proper forms and methods of their work.³¹ Within these formal parameters, however, there is always latitude for change, provided the architect himself commands respect for his own knowledge and personal religiosity, since in Hindu traditions authority ultimately rests with authoritative people, not books. Thus devotees can rightly claim that this temple is thoroughly "authentic" in spite of the considerable and obvious innovations.

The most striking distinctions between this modern American temple and its older urban counterparts in India are its use of levels and its manner of enclosing space. The Kapaleeswara Temple, for example, in the Mylapore section of Madras not twenty miles from Mahabalipuram, where Sri Ganapathi Sthapati works, has no basement level. The idea of a basement would normally be unthinkable because the deities should always be in unbroken contact with the ground. During the consecration rituals, the stone images are literally glued to their base, and the base is firmly fixed into the temple floor and thus to the earth. When I asked Ganapathi Sthapati about this seemingly unorthodox practice in building the temple in Lanham, he explained that under each of the images is a separate hollow pillar that is filled with dirt. From the basement level these look like supporting pillars, but in fact they serve fundamentally to provide each image the requisite contact with earth. The columns allow the temple to remain orthodox, with a basement.

In the Kapaleeswara Temple in Mylapore, all functions occur at ground level, but not under one roof as in the temple in Lanham. The Madras temple is actually a walled courtyard enclosing many smaller structures. Musicians often perform under the *mandapam*, the pillared pavilions. They do not use an auditorium with a stage but perform close to the gods in their holy sanctums; their music is directed to the gods and only overheard by devotees. The gods' several shrines can be recognized by

their ornate domes. The kitchens and the business offices, which are built onto the inner walls of the temple, are where the temple's daily routine occurs. Outside, the four surrounding streets are lined with shops, but on festival days the streets become the gods' royal roads when the divine images are processed around the temple borders. Thus the Kapaleeswara Temple, like the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple, provides space for music, for daily officekeeping chores, and for preparing the *prashad* (sanctified food that is offered to the gods, then eaten by devotees). However, while the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple divides these functions from the actual seats of the gods in one two-storied building, the Kapaleeswara Temple remains a single-level complex of buildings.

Climatic differences alone cannot account for this change in architecture from a walled compound in India to a single structure in America. The design of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple openly articulates theological changes that have occurred in the transplanting of India's gods to America. The community of devotees in the Washington area chose to construct a temple that would unite the two major Hindu traditions, Vaishnavism and Shaivism, "under one roof," as one member of the board of trustees aptly put it. Thus the Gods Siva and Vishnu are each housed in their own shrines, but within this single building. Other deities associated with each tradition have smaller shrines along the sides and the back of the first floor. A large shrine to Lord Murugan is at the center of the temple. The cupola over his image seems to blossom out of the temple's roof. He is flanked on the right and left by shrines of Siva and Vishnu respectively. The *vimanas* of their shrines likewise burst through the roof. The *vimanas* of other shrines are confined to the interior of the building.

A member of the board of trustees explained to me that the temple was carefully designed to exactly balance the two cosmic forces embodied in Siva and Vishnu. Thus, while the divine image of the powerful Goddess Durga rests on the north wall of the temple next to the Siva shrine, an image of the powerful Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, was to balance her power on the east next to Vishnu's shrine in the original plans. Now Hanuman stands in this place as a deity of dimensions expansive enough to balance the goddess's own staggering force. These stone images of Durga and Hanuman were the first to be consecrated, on September 27-30, 1990.

The choice of the divine occupants for these shrines was much discussed by the trustees and community of devotees here and remains in flux. The original plans for the temple included in the early fundraising brochure called for a shrine to Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu, to be placed next to another shrine housing Nataraja, Siva as the cosmic dancer. Now Hanuman occupies the place next to Rama, as is traditional. The

large wing dedicated to Lord Venkateswara was proposed by a committee formed within the larger congregation, who then gained the support of the trustees. The board of trustees announced in the temple newsletter that "in response to the overwhelming desire of the devotees," it had decided to build a Sri Venkateswara shrine as another extension to the present temple at the cost of \$240,000. I received notice of the formal proposal to raise \$300,000 to construct a shrine to Ayyappa as "an extension of the existing structure with the traditional 18 steps."

These decisions to include certain images reflect the creation of what could be called a new American Hindu pantheon. While traditional temples in South India often house several deities, and some major temples have substituted or subordinated one major deity for another in their thousand-year history, the choice of such an eclectic mix of deities from different regions in India and from once more distinct theologies is a phenomenon of modern times—especially of the rapid pace of temple growth in America. This new model is crucial because in America all the gods live in the same house.

This new model of a single enclosed space holding a group of different shrines is yet another architectural innovation within the boundaries of authenticity. The changes were explained to me by the member of the board of trustees who served as liaison between the board, Ganapathi Sthapati, his Indian crew, and the American contractors who actually built the basic structure. What appears in Lanham to be the outer wall of the temple actually functions like the outer wall that normally surrounds the open courtyard of a Hindu temple in South India. Thus inside this enclosure each deity continues to occupy his or her own shrine. The cupolas of the shrines of the three major deities actually protrude from the roof, and it is these three ornate *vimanas* that neighbors in Lanham see as they pass the temple. There are plans to put the *gopara*, the traditional massive gates at the cardinal directions in a temple's surrounding wall, onto the walls of this temple. But in the American context, these gates will appear as doors into this enclosed space. Hence the plurality of gods here live under the same roof, but nonetheless in their own rooms. Devotees tell me that this conglomerate space allows them either to see the temple as a unified divine area or to concentrate their devotion on one deity. As one said, "I can feel as though I am with only one god if I want, or with all."

The curious feature of this great effort at unity within the diversity of Hinduism, however, is the concomitant separation of sacred from secular in the use of two levels. Music, eating, office work, and education are now "downstairs" functions, while upstairs is reserved for the holy rituals and ceremonies. Further, no festival actually spills out into the streets of this quiet suburban neighborhood. When the gods are first processed, they are

carried inside around the first floor. During important rituals, such as the recent consecration rites, the priest carries holy water in sacred pots around an outer promenade which forms a railed porch circling the entire first floor and opening out onto a grand staircase leading down to the lower parking lot. Processions around this outer promenade are the only public display of Hindu rituals that Lanham, Maryland, will normally see.

The only god whose eyes turn to Cipriano Road is Ganesa, who can be seen looking out from his niche in the exterior wall. Ganesa, as the divine guardian of doors, is by his very nature a border-ward and thus looks out to the world. The other deities will live their lives, on the upper level, within these cinderblock walls. And more important, the devotees have chosen to demarcate the holy life of the gods above from the music, education, and business carried on below. Thus dance and education will not be conducted in front of the very eyes of the gods, as is the case in India. The Hindu gods in America truly live in a split-level suburban world, with its inside/outside, upstairs/downstairs dichotomies.

The transplantation of Hinduism to America in the case of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple is not just a matter of finding a home and feeling at home, as John Fenton so well describes; it is a matter of building and maintaining a house. The crucial clue revealed in the design of the temple and its place on Cipriano Road is that ultimate marker of the American dream—home ownership. In India, ancient temples were built and maintained by kings. During the colonial period, this royal function passed to the new British government, which created a system of temple trusts both independent of and yet part of the state governments, a system, much like our federal reserve, which remains today. In modern India the very wealthy build temples, and the state still has a hand in their maintenance and construction. In Lanham, on the other hand, the devotees own the temple as a joint trust. Several members of the board of trustees pointed out that the model of administration by elected and appointed trustees supported by hundreds of individual contributions is new. They would agree with the way the chairman of the board of trustees of a Hindu temple in Nashville described the situation: "We found ourselves, a bunch of amateurs, trying to manage the complexities of a religious institution." Through their trustees, devotees pay the mortgage each month, and all the other problems of home ownership must be met without fail.

But this house belongs to the whole community and marks the true rise of the middle-class Indian. As they moved close to the deity or climbed up on the roof to see the *vimanas*, or sat right next to or even entered the sanctum during the rituals, members of the board of trustees and many devotees said to me, "We could never get this close to the ritual in India; we could never see such things there; we could never take such an important

part in this ritual." In owning a temple, thus, the middle class has thrown down the rights of kings, the rights of the British Raj, and the rights of the state over such structures. It was not lost on devotees that as the fireworks blasted above Washington on July 4, 1991, the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple was installing its gods! In 1993, I heard a legend that a famous psychic at the turn of the century had predicted that Hindu temples would come to America on a Fourth of July holiday.

But what does this phenomenon of home ownership have to do with the issues of the universality and particularity of the Hindu temple that began this essay? The point here can be stated simply: The mobile middle class in the world now goes from house to house, not place to place! The temple stands amid other houses, but it is not related to them in any way other than that this suburban world allows such a temple to exist as a house among houses. Even the zoning laws in such areas recognize such houses of god as residential and not commercial property. In this sense, only such neutral areas that are not bounded neighborhoods could so easily tolerate such diversity. The Indian community at the temple takes great care not to disturb its close neighbors and those whose houses border the temple. Devotees have invited their neighbors to participate in important activities, and a few of these folks do drop by as good but somewhat bewildered neighbors. I found myself explaining the rituals to an African American neighbor who had come by to see her new neighbors. She quietly asked me the pressing question for her as a Muslim: "Do they believe in God?" When I said yes, she left satisfied, saying that was all that really counted.

Suburban land on the borders of the metropolitan area remains segmented into plots. Like their neighbors, the devotees of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple do not bring their private religious life out into the streets. Religious practice is carried on within the confines of their own castle—in a very middle-class sense of that term. Here is one structure that is to hold the new Hindu family in America under one roof, separate but equal with the other religions of America. The gods of India have a new home, a foothold on the western shore, a life beyond the borders of India but yet a life confined to a house. Is this not the quintessential characteristic of the suburban home? Family on the inside facing out. Diversities living side by side but never infringing on the other—a patchwork quilt, a cut-and-paste world of multiculturalism that is stitched together by neighborliness and good fences. Yet within the walls of each square exists a private world, my blue heaven, as the old song goes, "with a plot of, not a lot of land."

Thus as a house, the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple becomes a very particular and concrete entity, while as a place, Lanham, Maryland, remains seemingly neutral—the location a plot on a surveyor's chart of streets and houses. But this American Hindu holy house also contains two levels.

What are the upstairs and downstairs of this world? Certainly the down-stairs is not completely situated in Lanham, Maryland, but it is also not identical to the orthodox upstairs where the priests imported from India do their holy work. Ultimately, the split-level world of this suburban Washing-ton temple provides an apt image for the cultural world of the affluent Indian American community here. In America, Indians live in a split-level universe that is "traditional" above but with a lower floor that is the space of the worldwide modern middle-class family life—from which Indians came in India, but which is now enhanced by their move to America.

Upstairs/Downstairs: Negotiating Gender and Generations

In the attractive brochure introducing the temple to prospective donors, the temple lists its services as "religious," "cultural," and "philosophical." The category "religious" is confined to the celebration of festivals, group worship, the performance of weddings and other life-cycle rites, and classes on "Sanskrit, Vedas, and Hindu rituals." The term "religious," in other words, now belongs only to the ritual performances of the priests. These are the upstairs activities. Philosophical talks and discussions—the preaching activities of Hinduism—now belong downstairs with such teaching activities as summer camps for youth and adults, yoga classes, dance classes, and lessons in the various vernacular languages of India. Although such an upstairs/downstairs division of the temple (reserving the word "religion" for the upstairs) is quite out of step with Hindu tradition, the division makes sense in America. Sacred is not really divided from secular here, and middle-class family life has actually invaded what were once professional and priestly realms. The family is now on the lower floor of the temple. The middle-class world has been reconstructed within the temple as it is known in the homes of recent immigrants. These are not sanctuaries *from* America, because the suburban outside has been integrated into both floors of the temple, though as an Indo-American, not a Euro-American, phenomenon.

The case of dance is instructive here. Until the early part of this century, dancers in India were temple servants who worked alongside the priests to provide comfort and pleasure to the gods embodied in the temple. A rigorous reform movement accused these *devadasis*, slaves of god, of being nothing more than glorified prostitutes and corrupting the temple, and they were soon expelled. But within two decades, Indians realized that they had thrown out an important cultural performance in the name of an ostensible moral purity. Dance was revived outside the



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The two levels of the temples are clearly visible, with very American picnic tables just outside the kitchen areas.

temple as an art to be cultivated by the daughters of the rising upper-middle class, and so it remains in performance halls in India. But in America it has returned to the temple, while acquiring much the same place that ballet lessons have in the Euro-American home, as a matter of family pride in the accomplishments of a daughter who, nonetheless, is rarely encouraged to become a full-time professional dancer.

Pride in the "culture" of the homeland frequently marks the middle-class first and second generation's most permanent tie to the mother country in the American context. For the secular Indian, the categories of "culture" and "philosophy" have become neutral terms with few religious overtones. A great Carnatic vocal performed in the common room is like the Ave Maria sung in a concert hall, not at the altar in a Catholic church. Similarly, discussions of the meaning of religious texts are "philosophy"

and fully congruent with the modern rational world, whereas the same text chanted in ritual might seem an embarrassing incantation. There are many in the Indian American community who are not supportive of religious ritual, but they do want to keep up family values and to retain Hinduism as a moral and aesthetic force in their life. The lower-floor auditorium is for them.

The lower floor is also for the second generation, for whom the activities upstairs often seem as confusing as for any American youth. John Fenton summarizes the dilemma for the generation who pledged much of their lives and even their fortune to help build this temple: "The irony of Hindu temple-building activity in America is that it emphasizes that aspect of Hindu religion that so far has the least meaning and that is the most opaque to second generation Indian immigrants."³² "We have built this for the sake of our children," said one older devotee while pointing to this grand edifice in the nation's capital. "Are we building it for nothing?" A telling scene in the movie *Mississippi Masala* shows two young second-generation children playing cowboys and Indians (the Native American variety) in the midst of the celebration of the holy Hindu wedding rites in a small town in Mississippi. Several young boys with baseball bats in hand, ready to "play ball," can be spotted outside the holy *yagasala*, the tent constructed to build the sacred fires needed to awaken the gods during the great installation rituals in July.

Such "youths," at quite a loss on the upper floor, are more at home in the classrooms below. In the first National Indian-American Students Conference, hosted by Sangam, the Indian students' association at the University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill, Indian American college students from almost fifty institutions articulated their discomfort with religion "as a show" and with ritual that they could not and were not asked to understand.³³ An essay in *Sanyog: South Asian Expressions* poses the dilemma of ritual for the second generation: "You can't give god a granola bar."³⁴ Here in Washington, those families who chose to watch the ritual on video downstairs sat in congenial groups, as mother-father-children, while upstairs the South India proprieties were tacitly observed, with gender-segregated seating. An active group of young people who were trying to get into the spirit of things during this *mahakumbabhisekam* ritual nonetheless did not remain upstairs for the rituals but sold "Om Shanti" t-shirts on the lower floor, while their mothers cooked a phenomenal amount of food, which they sold downstairs at nominal cost to raise money for the temple.

Women in the kitchen downstairs and men carrying out priestly functions (now defined as "religious") upstairs is the source of low-level, but palpable, tension in the temple. This gender dichotomy in part reflects

traditional Indian society, but it also is created by the upstairs/downstairs spatial division. There are some real ironies here. For American feminists, women in the kitchen marks gender segregation and subordination, but these South Asian women work in the temple kitchens, a task that in India is reserved for Brahmin men, whose ritual purity was a prerequisite for handling the holy food which was always served first to god. When women now make this *prashad*, sanctified meals eaten by devotees as a sacrament, they are assuming a priestly role; their domestic task has expanded in America into temple service. The downstairs of the temple now has become a true home where the housewife cooks and serves the larger family of devotees. Sharing this home-space with young people, women find their status at once enhanced by their greater role but also diminished because that role is no longer on a level (literally) with the other ritual functions of the temple. In American fashion, food, now only vaguely sacralized as the *prashad*, is served as "lunch" on Styrofoam plates by exhausted volunteers and eaten with plastic spoons.

Women grumble about this aspect of the new split-level world. Many of these women work and succeed in America, as do their spouses. Yet here in this space, the division could be seen as even more segregated than in the "control" temple Kapaleeswara in Madras, where the cooking is left to the Brahmins and women are not behind kitchen walls. I heard discontent in the American temple; women mentioned to me that they have no real say in serious decision making. Yet women were forceful and very active not only in cooking but also in decorating the temple upstairs and in organizing fundraising; most important, I heard a number of women chanting in Sanskrit along with the priest as they sat "listening." I suspected a desire for an increased ritual role, and my suspicions were realized late on the last holy night of the installation rituals that July. After a long, quite beautiful marriage ritual for the god Murugan and his wives while the congregation chanted the wedding vows for the divine couples, the lovely palanquins with the bronze images of the deities inside were lifted by male devotees for the ride around the borders of the interior of the temple. When they reached the shrine of the goddesses Sarada and Parvati, however, the two palanquins apparently changed hands—for when the procession came out the other side of the temple, they were being carried by some joyous women. I asked one female palanquin bearer if it was usual in India for women to do this. She replied immediately, "In India they are male chauvinists, but this is America." As the palanquins turned the corner, one middle-aged woman grumbled about seeing women behave in this manner, but the faces of the hijackers revealed the glee of women taking their first steps toward a new role in their ritual and managerial positions in the temple.

Upstairs/downstairs may be solid architectural space, but it is not, then, stable social space. The more domesticated the temple becomes, the more its overarching model becomes the family, the more the tensions in middle-class family life will explode through the seemingly solid floors. By adopting the suburbs as the location of the temple, by opting for the suburban split of domestic life from public life, the founders of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple sought to create a Hindu family within the American world of family life and family values. American life has not been factored out; it has been invited in to rest right under the Hindu holy sanctums. But as the women here have already shown, the space between the floors is not airtight.

Between Upstairs and Downstairs: Technology as the Third Space

The moment when the priests awakened the gods to their new life in America by pouring the holy waters, the *abhisekam*, over the stone images was viewed by many devotees on video monitors carefully placed alongside each sanctum. In the earlier *pranapratishta* ceremonies which awakened Durga, Hanuman, and Ganesa, the *abhisekam* for each deity was performed in rapid sequence in each sanctum. Devotees sat facing the deity whose rituals they had sponsored through donation. The video monitors allowed devotees to get the closest view of the ritual in front of them and to witness each of the consecutive consecrations; the chief engineer for this complex technology switched from camera to camera to catch the crucial moments at each shrine. A telling moment in this conflation of ancient ritual with advanced technology occurred when I was seated with a large group of devotees in front of Hanuman, with another group of devotees at our rear facing the Durga shrine in the opposite direction. At the moment when the holy waters awakened Durga, my Hanuman group raised their folded hands in the sign of devotion to the image on the video monitor in front, when a simple twist of the head would have revealed Durga in the flesh just behind. The image on the video monitor was an acceptable double for the image to the rear.

In the consecration ritual, this video system operated by an African American crew and director became an ever-present symbol of the modernity of these rituals. Although few non-Indians participated, the video crew was afforded the clearest vision of the holiest of sights by virtue of their skill in the new medium of imaging. This use of video cameras is by no means new to the Hindu temple. The cameras now have the first view of the holiest of rituals in the sanctums of major temples in India when there is

no other way to accommodate the desire of the vast crowd of devotees to share in these holy sights. But new in America was the choice to put these cameras in non-Hindu hands. The crew remained patient and respectful through the long days of these rituals. The remark of one tired "grip" showed how well the presence of the video cameras had made the translation of this temple ritual to an American idiom: "This is the longest church service I ever attended," he sighed on the fifth straight day of the rituals.

The non-Hindu community was again directly incorporated into the ritual at the point of another technical skill. The African American mason who carefully cut and fixed the marble on the walls of the interior of the sanctum, the very place where the divine images would reside, became an important participant in the consecration ritual. On the first day of the rituals in July, this mason found himself standing with his shirt and shoes removed in front of the sacred fire. Minutes later, with a turban on his head, this obviously serious but delighted mason pulled a burning straw man through each of the interiors of the new sanctums in the temple. His was the final act of purification to make the sanctums ready for their divine residents. His work as mason had taken on its full ritual significance.

The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple lives with its doors open to its neighbors. No one is excluded; an announcement of the consecration rituals in July invited "all Hindus and non-Hindus alike to join in this unique event." Some non-Hindu Indians, some non-Hindu Americans, and some Hindu Euro-Americans came. But they were not as openly representative of the greater American community as the mason who was seen to stand for the many non-Hindus who had a hand in constructing the temple.

There are non-Hindus who now figure in the stories told about the monumental five-year task of constructing this temple. I heard particular praise for the Italian American master stonecutter who worked with his Indian counterparts, the *silpis* from Madras. Their common love of stone led to an exchange of ideas and techniques. The American stonecutter introduced the *silpis* to the ideas of laser cutting and developing computer patterns for their decorative work. He marveled at their style and the skill of their work. These exchanges took place on the level of seeing and doing, because many of the *silpis* know little English. Another much-praised non-Hindu company were the movers who successfully brought the two-ton stone sculpture of Vishnu into his sanctum inch by inch without harming a speck of his body. Their technical skill, but also their quiet and innate sense of the sacredness of the piece, impressed the Indian crew. It is in such stories of a shared love of craft and the technology of construction, the mutual awe at skills and design, that Hindus and non-Hindus meet in this temple, just as it is in front of the video that families of all generations are able to sit together. Technology, in this temple, is the third space where



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The African American stonemason works in the interior of a main shrine, while a traditional mason from India completes the exterior ornamentation.

differences of generation and even of ethnic and religious origins are increasingly able to find a meeting ground.

Conclusion: A House with Many Booms

Trustees and devotees of the Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple live with and talk openly about the many tensions in their new lives in the United States. Husbands and wives worry about the loss of Indian culture in their children. The "children" who are now adults in college wonder about the

meaning of this Hinduism that they see reconstructed in front of them. At a time of rising Hindu nationalism in India, these Hindus away from India wonder how to react to the new Indian political-religious parties now coming here for their support. Men remain worried about their chances for ultimate success in a highly competitive global market. Discussion of an economic "glass ceiling" are part of the ethos of those who also worry about the economics of keeping a roof over the gods. But this congregation has built the dialogue, the tensions, and the uncertainty of their lives into the space of a temple in suburban Washington, D.C. In a move that was at once as characteristically American as it was Indian, they offered their prosperity as a down payment, mortgaged their fears, and built a house.

This temple as a *house*, however, has fixed nothing for these Indian Americans—and, I would argue, was never meant to *fix* anything. This building made of concrete, these gods formed from stone, are not inanimate objects that are riveted motionless. The temple and the gods are "vibrating," as Ganapathi Sthapati told the devotees at the moment of the consecration of the temple in July 1991. Once the houses—of the gods and of humanity—are freed from their status as inanimate things, their power to transform and to re-create their creators becomes clear. In this sense of the *power* of space, the American home and the Hindu holy house live as analogues in the modern world.

In a dramatic statement in *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard declares, "The house remodels man."³⁵ David Knipe, in a striking conclusion to a volume of cross-cultural essays on the temple in society, also ends with the suggestion that temples are ultimately places for and models of "transformation" both for the self and for an entire culture.³⁶ In these approaches to constructed space, the human house and the divine temple are alive with power; those who associate the construction of buildings only with finding security or with engraving meanings in stone do not understand the tensile, active, "vibrating" nature of holy stones or sacred rocks or even houses. Bachelard's houses are built out of wood and stone and imagination to re-place the human soul into a built life in this world.

But just as Bachelard constructed his musings on space in the middle of this century out of his experiences with the house, so the house in the contemporary world may be the primary model and space for middle-class imaginings of the saved. "The City" as a place of dreams may well have been replaced by "the house." Certainly children "grow up" in houses, and old people hope to "pass away" in the heart of their own homes; the magazine rack at the grocery store is filled with photos of "dream houses." The Sri Siva-Vishnu Temple in America may prove to be the kind of contemporary house—with enough rooms, staircases, twists, and turns—to hold a very diverse family made up of gods and humans, men and

women, parents and children, Indians and Americans, while giving them all space enough to grow.

Notes

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