

Edina Community Embraces New Hindu Temple

By Emilie Kastner

A winding concrete pathway leads east from the blacktop parking lot in the front to the back of the ivory colored grandiose building, complete with tall stone pillars and high, spacious arcs. A string of multi-colored celebratory flags tied to a towering flagpole announces the entrance, which is greeted with rows of sandals, sneakers and dress shoes, and a heavy wooden door.

The concrete outside is cold to the touch on bare feet, but the beige carpeting indoors is welcoming, as is the aroma of burning incense wafting down the stairs from the sanctuary. Voluminous sound waves from a large, brass bell wake the inner ears and a melodious incantation hums in the background.

A bustling crowd of brightly dressed men, women and children scurries about in a chaotically organized fashion. Since its opening in August 2011, Sri Venkateswara (Balaji) Temple (SV Temple) has only increased in popularity and attendance.

The new Hindu temple opened its doors at 7615 Metro Blvd., in the former location of Spa Bella Casa. Built in the 1970s, the three-story building consists of 24,000 square feet of finished space, 10,000 unfinished. Since its purchase date, more than \$500,000 has been spent on renovations.

"We were looking for a centrally located place," said Temple President Madhu Reddy. "We found that the [Highway] 100 and 494 intersection is suitable and center



Photo by Emilie Kastner

Gifts of fruit and flowers are presented to the deities during puja, a ceremony showing devotion through incantations, songs and prayers.

for the whole Indian community living in this area." Reddy and his wife, Jyothsna, were instrumental in the temple's opening.

Before moving to the United States in 1981, the Reddys wanted to establish a temple in their home country.

"Most Indians think they want to do something for their own country, their own village, their own people ... but in our case, it was an opportunity for us to participate in the temple here," said Madhu Reddy, estimating there are 20,000 to 30,000 Hindus in the metro area. "Honestly, I think that India has got many temples ... This temple here is more important for Indian people ... I know spiritually

they need a place to go raise the children, to teach the customs [and] family values.”

The Reddys’ office building in Golden Valley, the original location for the temple founded in November 2009, could only accommodate about 80 people, whereas the new location offers parking for about 340. On busier nights, for celebrations and festivals, surrounding community businesses are gracious about allowing devotees to park in the neighboring lots, said Madhu Reddy.

For the highly celebrated event Diwali, an Indian holiday that follows the calendar of the Tirumala Temple in India, also known as the Festival of Lights, the temple hosted 700 to 800 people in October 2011. “For festivals, we’ll get anywhere from 700 to 1,000,” said Religious Committee Chair Vamshi Jonnalagadda. “On weekends, we get maybe 100 people a day. On weekdays, if you count, on average it’s probably around 20 to 25.” SV Temple is one of seven in the metro area. The other six are located in Brooklyn Park, Brooklyn Center, Maple Grove, Eagan and Minneapolis, where there are two.

Madhu Reddy said there are certain criteria for any temple.

“One of the most important things is to have a lake or some river to flow right in front of the temple which should be in the northeast corner,” he said. The entrance to the building also must face east, which is why the primary entrance is in the back of the building. “When we are coming, we are to look at the face of the god when we

come inside; not from the backside.” The new location in Edina meets the criteria.

“Also, we are very fortunate,” he added. “The City of Edina was very supportive of us.” The Mayor and City Council members came to the temple’s inauguration in August.

“We could not have been greeted more warmly than we were by some of the members, including Madhu Reddy and his wife,” said Edina Mayor James Hovland of his visit. “Their family has given so much to make the temple a reality for Hindus in the South Metro.”

SV Temple is dedicated to the worship of Venkateswara, also known as Balaji, who has many other names. Of the three main Hindu deities, including Brahma, the creator, and Shiva, the destroyer, the SV Temple is devoted to worshipping Vishnu, the sustainer and protector.

Vishnu has 10 main avatars, of which Venkateswara is an incarnation. The goddess Lakshmi and her eight incarnations, representing eight kinds of wealth, are also worshipped at the temple.

Two priests, Vamsi Kanduri and Murali Vedala, officiate worship ceremonies and Samskaras, traditional rites of passage. There are 41 scriptural Samskaras, but only some are modernly followed, including a baby shower; name giving; first solid food; first hair cutting; starting school; a Thread Ceremony, which is traditionally comparable to a Christian Confirmation or a Jewish Bar Mitzvah; marriage

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Devotees light candles as part of Diwali, the Festival of Lights, which celebrates the goddess Lakshmi, the provider of eight types of wealth.

and a funeral, said Jonnalagadda. "Every Hindu follows Samkaras."

Devotees follow the teachings of four scriptures, Rig Veda being the most commonly followed. These scriptures have been written in Sanskrit, an official language of India used for incantations and chanting. In addition to its use as a place of worship, the temple is also an avenue for community outreach and a school.

A medical doctor who graduated from the University of Minnesota in family practice, Jyothsna Reddy has been establishing Sri Venkateswara Temple School, of which enrollment was closed on the first day of class due to

its overwhelming popularity. "We teach many Indian languages: Hindi, Telugu and Tamil," said Madhu Reddy. "We also teach music, culture, yoga and meditation."

Commonly in attendance are students from Shakopee, Richfield, Edina, Plymouth, Eagan and other surrounding suburbs. The temple also hosts monthly health care series with speakers of Indian origin who talk about a range of topics including insomnia, depression, nutrition and heart conditions.

The Reddys always intended on returning to India, but now they're heavily involved in the community. "When you come here, then you have family, children ... Then you decide to stay here; then you're stuck here," he said, laughing. "I always thought I would come here a few years and then go back. That never happened." The couple said they're free to travel back and forth, and they have a house in India should they choose to do so.

"I look forward to going back [to the temple] again with some of the Hindu residents of Edina to experience the traditions, the music, the gentle nature of the people and to try to better understand the religion and its beliefs," said Hovland, who encourages Edina residents to visit. "The temple is open to all and it is a wonderful addition to our faith community."

For more information, call 952-835-2250, email manager@svtemplemn.org or visit www.svtemplemn.org.