



The Richmond Hill Hindu Temple – A Short History

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Language and religion have been the main components of heritage preserved and propagated in every society for generations. This has also been a characteristic of migratory communities. Hindus, particularly, passed on the torch of knowledge to successive generations even when they travelled and settled elsewhere. There were only a few hundred Hindus of the South Indian tradition in Canada in the 60's, from many parts of the world, but their passion for community worship was strong. This passion was kept alive through weekly bhajan programs and enrolling the children in heritage language programs. These weekly bhajan programs were initially held separately, in the homes of a few dedicated South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil families. Subsequently, the two groups got together through a Heritage Languages Program project and started teaching Tamil to children, in the premises of a High School in North York. It was during these classes that the adult leaders of the community got together and planned the formation of a temple society as the foundation to build an authentic Hindu Temple with altars and priests brought from India and providing all the necessary religious services to the Hindu population in Canada.

The Hindu Temple Society of Canada was conceived in 1973 and chartered in 1975, with nine directors coming from different backgrounds of the Hindu population at that time and representing many language groups from India and Sri Lanka. At various stages of its beginning, it was also known as Siva Vishnu Temple, Ganesha Temple and the Richmond Hill Hindu Temple and is still recognized by any of those names.

The leaders of the temple group prepared a Temple plan, showing the different altars, general floor plan and proposed activities for an authentic Hindu Temple built and run according to the Agama traditions of Hinduism in India and Sri Lanka. A remarkable aspect of this plan was its ambitious intention to support a congregation of thousands of devotees even though, at the time the plan was conceived, the devotee base was only in the hundreds. The turmoil in Sri Lanka and the arrival of thousands of Tamils from Sri Lanka to Canada was still about a decade away. The leaders had shown remarkable foresight in anticipating the population explosion of potential devotees to the temple.

Though most of the members would have been satisfied with a small simple Ganesha Temple, the larger plan was taken to the senior Sankaracharya of Kanchipuram Math, who readily approved the design and the plan and gave his blessings and offered all possible help for proceeding further. That plan became our starting design for the temple. It was designed on the 'Shanmadha' principle of Adi Sankara with altars of deities acceptable to all different sects of Hindu communities. The main altars planned were for Lord Ganesha, Lord Muruga and Lord Balaji with subsidiary altars designed for Lord Shiva, Parvathi, Nataraja, Durga and four Ammans – Valli, Devayani, Andal and Mahalakshmi, as well as an altar for Sri Rama, Lakshmana, Sita and Hanuman.



There was not much progress in the project due to various social and financial constraints, for about 10 years. However, the membership of the Society kept the ideas of the temple alive through patience and ardent prayers. The trustees were also on an active lookout for a suitable land for the temple. Two trustees enlisted the support of an employee of the Town of Richmond Hill town to alert them when a suitable land to build a temple came up on the market. This enabled them to learn about an advertisement for the sale of a piece of land in the corner of Bayview Avenue and Elgin Mills Road. Proactively, the committee negotiated with the owner and agreed to buy the nearly 4 acres of prime land, with a stream running in the middle of it, for a price of \$158,000. The existence of the stream which could form the 'theertham' for the temple decided the matter. There was a major hitch, though. With only \$12,000 of contributions in the bank at that time, a mortgage was needed to secure the purchase. Discussions were held with CIBC, which agreed to give the mortgage on the condition that five trustees provide personal bank guarantees of \$100,000 each. In a remarkable gesture, five trustees each provided the guarantee required and the purchase was completed.

An interesting side note which has since become, in the minds of many devotees, a matter of faith, is worth including here. Following possession of the land, when the volunteers went in to clear the waist high grass with machetes, they found an abandoned car on the back lot and found the number plate still on it. The number plate had the letters "AUM", which of course is the universal Hindu mantra. It was a thrilling moment for the devotees who saw this as a very good omen and a sign from Lord Ganesha that the ground was blessed and an excellent choice for the temple. Incidentally, the current 'altars hall' sits on that spot, though not intentionally planned. Another coincidence, only noticed in 2017, was that the year the plate was issued (1973, as indicated on the plate) was the same year that the temple society had been formed. It looks like Lord Ganesha had decided that His followers coming from far off lands as immigrants to Canada would find a 'refuge' for all their religious needs on this piece of land in Richmond Hill and would build, with His blessings, a great temple for generations to come.

Now came the difficult and sensitive job of convincing the Town Council and the Mayor of Richmond Hill to accept The Temple Society as good corporate citizen with the proper zoning and building permits to build and run the temple in Richmond Hill. When two trustees, went to meet the Mayor, he was very reluctant at first to accept the application. However, after persuasive discussions on the true nature of the proposal and how it could be a landmark organization in Richmond Hill for religious coexistence, besides being an attraction for the million strong and growing Hindu community in the Golden Horseshow, he agreed to be a guest participant at the ground-breaking ceremony on October 16, 1983. Even at that time he put forth a condition: if he found us an equally acceptable piece of land with a stream, in a location along Yonge Street, and away from our chosen location, we would have to move there. Fortunately, through Ganesha's blessings, he could not find any other site in time. The ground breaking (also known as Sod turning ceremony) was enthusiastically attended by dignitaries like the local MP, MLA, Mayors of Markham, Richmond Hill, Councilors, Federal and Provincial representatives and community leaders. The event was also covered in the local media.

A detailed writeup of the construction of the temple and the sculpting of the idols by the renowned Sri Janakirama Sthapathi and his team of 15 silpis (sculptors) is provided elsewhere in the souvenir. The extent of the volunteer work (Kar Seva) in building the initial temple structure must be mentioned here.



From taking time-off completely from work, to planning the initial construction as a set of small tasks which could be performed by non-professionals, key trustees and building professionals among the devotees took the lead and created the framework including electrical work and carpentry. Many donated materials such as lights. Youngsters and adults including sari-clad ladies were pounding nails on wooden structures, painting and decorating, while other volunteers brought food and snacks for the workers all day for 3-4 weeks. The entire project was completed with no paid workers or paid materials and it gave the community a sense of belonging and togetherness in participating in the noble project. This spirit of volunteerism has continued till now.

Even as the construction was going on, the community began to contribute financially as well. Fourteen trustees gave personal guarantees of \$50,000, each, to obtain loan from the bank for construction. Everyone was invited to participate. Children enthusiastically participated by putting their name on individual bricks going into the walls with a donation of \$2 each. Families came forward to sponsor whole altars, parts of the altars like doors, linings etc., either individually or as a group with members of their native village back in Sri Lanka. Donations in kind and money were offered as needed.

The formal installation of Lord Murugan, in his present abode was done on 2nd July 1988. By 1989, all the other altars were open for service with 'Prathishta' ceremonies conducted as per the traditions and sastras for each. The congregation grew steadily and by 1990, the temple was comparable to the more established New York and the Pittsburgh temples in terms of popularity among North American Hindu devotees. There is a very significant difference in the experience of this temple compared to the other North American Hindu temples. This temple is truly a people's temple, with more than 90% of the income coming from services rendered, such as archanas, abhishekam, various homams and other services, as opposed to other temples, where much of the revenue comes from a few financially well-off devotees, and a relatively small revenue comes from the services mentioned. The local Hindu community, especially the Sri Lankan Tamil community had rallied around the temple and enabled its rapid expansion and improvement. Grand festivals are the norm in the temple, with some festival or the other being celebrated for nearly 200 days in a year. Devotees attend in large numbers, making this one of the most active Hindu temples in the Western Hemisphere.

As per sastras, the first "Punarudharana Kumbabhishekam" (Renovation and Reconsecration), due in twelve-year cycles, was planned to be celebrated in 2000 and the deities were moved to a temporary set of altars called "Balalayam" in the wedding hall (the original structure of the temple). Unfortunately, the renovation work took more than a year and the actual Kumbabhishekam was done early 2001. The construction work caused some disruption and it was nearly 2 years before the full congregation was back at a familiar level of participation. There was, however, a 'missing feeling' of unfinished construction – Rajagopurams, Granite flooring, full landscaping around the temple etc. Soon, the temple acquired the piece of land south of the temple for a price of about \$2 million to preserve the pristine nature of the surroundings and for possible future expansion.

The next Kumbabhishekam was announced for 2012 and preparations started in 2009 itself. The construction / reconstruction work was completed and a grand Kumbabishekam was celebrated on 28 October 2012. It was a grand group of Priests lead by three Chief Priests namely Pillaiyarpatii Sri Pitchai



Kurukkal, Sri Lanka Sri Somaskanda Kurukkal and Bangalore Sri Varadaraja Bhattar, assisted by about 70 local priests from other temples in Toronto.

At that time, the work of building the front towers – Rajagopurams – could not be completed and on religious advice, it was decided to complete that work and do a separate ‘Rajagopura Kumbabishekam’ later. The construction on the three towers is now complete with the usual intense participation by trustees and volunteers. The fruits of their work and the support from the devotees complemented the professional construction and the much awaited Rajagopura Mahakumbabhishekam is now a reality.

The affairs of the Temple are governed by a Board of Trustees, which has evolved in composition over the years in step with the demographic changes in the congregation. In 1999, institutional change was brought about whereby, the majority positions in the Board of Trustees (11 out of 19) were assigned to members of the Sri Lankan community, reflecting the contributions and involvement by that community. The other 8 positions were assigned to Telugu speaking (2) and non-Sri Lankan Tamils (6). While the Board positions are allocated based on community backgrounds, the Temple belongs to all and everyone belongs to the Temple.

We can all be rightfully proud of the legacy we are building and leaving for future generations to enjoy.

