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BUILDING GANESHA'S NEW ABODE IN MELB

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Building Ganesha's new abode in Melb

How traditional artisans worked on an all-granite structure in a $4 million development design. **SIMMI SINGH** and **RAJNI ANAND LUTHRA** report





A history of the Sri Vakra

The temple was first conceived in 1989, when a breakaway group moved away from the Hindu Society of Victoria, frustrated at the slow progress in the development of a Ganesha temple.

Tracing the history, Shan Pillai said, "We procured a church building no longer in use, close to the city. A pro-tem committee was founded with trustees, members and volunteers, and with donated funds, we began the process of building the temple in 1990."

The deity was given to them by Kanchi Shankaracharya. Shan and his wife went to India to source a deity that they wanted blessed by the Shankaracharya. They could not find one, but paid a visit to the Shankaracharya regardless, and were pleasantly surprised when he offered them a deity.

"Our association with Kanchi is therefore very long and very deep,"Shan said with reverence. "We have gone back for every consecration."

(It would turn out to be the first of many "miracles" in the journey of the construction of this temple, miracles in which challenges that cropped up were magically sorted out – almost as if Ganesha himself, the Remover of Obstacles, was clearing the barriers for this devout group of Melbournians.)

In Melbourne, in the absence of formal premises, the deity lived in the home of devotees Mr and Mrs Somasundaram for eighteen months and was taken out every month for worship at a local hall where devotees gathered.

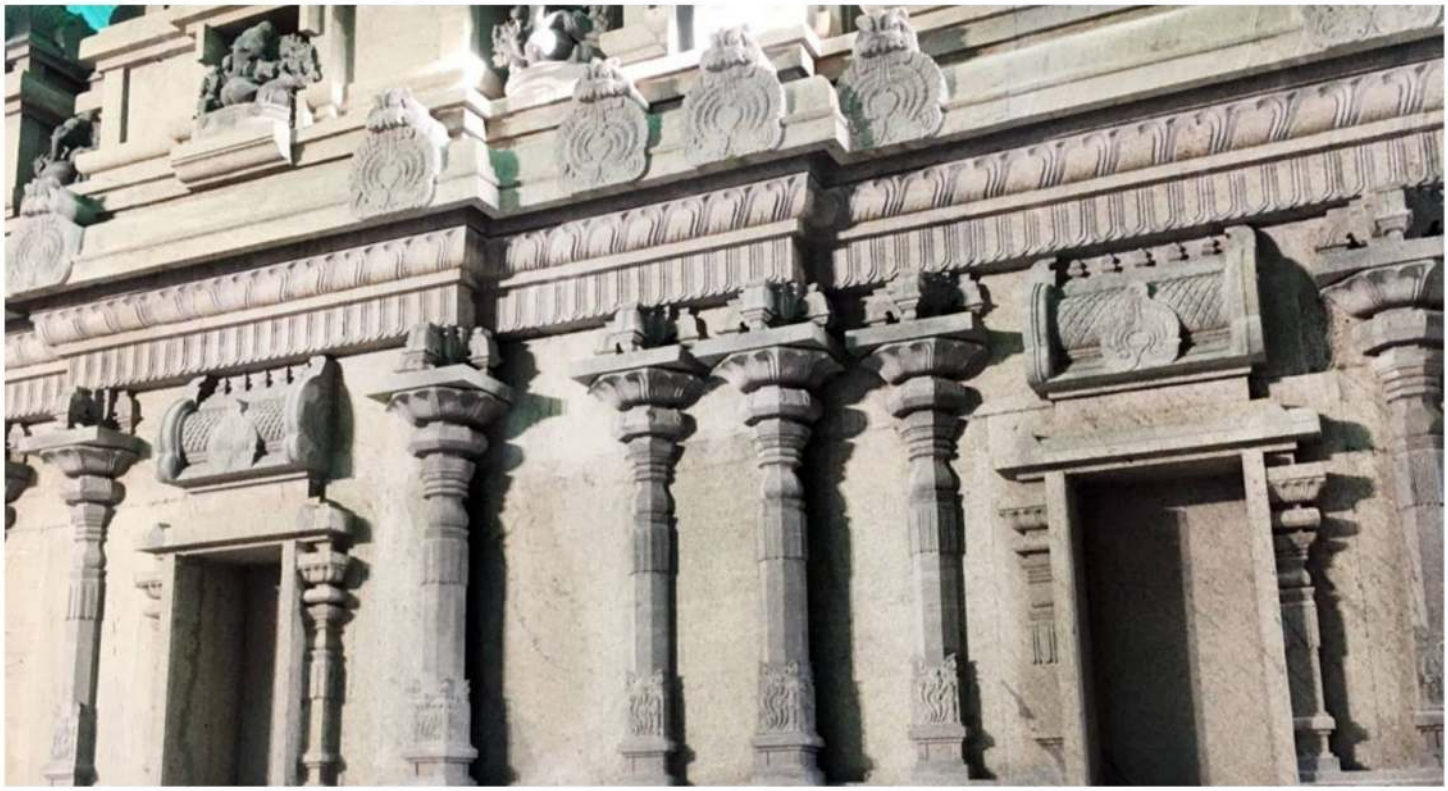
"500 devotees turned up in those early days. It was a number we never expected, but it only strengthened our resolve to build a temple to our Ganesha".

Soon after, the Melbourne Vinayagar Hindu Sangam (MVHS) came into being as a registered non-profit organisation. Stapathi Purushothaman came in 1991 to design the first Ganesha Temple in Victoria. The *kumbabhishegam* of the temple was carried out in 1992.

By 2019, the Sangam had acquired four surrounding properties, the last of which was procured at $1.3 million.

For the second consecration in 2007 (Hindu temples have to be consecrated every 12 years or so), Purushottaman extended the temple premises and added a unique *raja gopuram* (grand entrance), built partly in granite sourced from India and partly in concrete.

The following year, the ten-day Mahotsava festival was launched, now an annual affair. The major highlight of this festival is the chariot procession held on



thunda Vinayagar temple

Much to the disappointment of thousands of devotees, the latest COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne has caused delays in the consecration ceremony (*Maha Kumbabhishegam*) of the largest Hindu temple in the Southern Hemisphere made with handmade granite stones.

Dedicated to Hinduism's most-loved deity Ganesha, the Sri Vakrathunda Vinayagar Temple in The Basin recently underwent a historic transformation in its architecture, with granite used for all eleven of its shrines.

Granite is typically used for the construction of Hindu temples and the decorations, as well as the deities within.

"We are proud to say our temple now becomes the largest Hindu temple in Victoria and in the Southern Hemishphere built in the traditional style of our ancestors," Balaa Kandiah, the president of the Melbourne Vinayagar Hindu Sangam (MVHS) told *Indian Link*.

Granite is a highly durable stone, making it ideal for temple use as it can last thousands of years. It is also scratch proof, very strong and siliceous. But ancient Hindu temple architecture lists that granite is chosen as it is the only stone where all five elements of nature - earth, water, air, fire, and space - can be found.

"It's a kind of 'living stone', so our statues capture the vibrations of the music, the chanting and the prayers conducted within the temple," Shan Pillai, Secretary of the MVHS said.

More than 1,200 stones were used for this project, with the main shrine of Lord Ganesha alone built from 17 layers of almost 400 granite stones.

Architect Purushothaman (Puru) Jayaraman designed and executed the complex project, inspired by the drawings on the iconic Hindu temples in Tamil Nadu built by Raja Raja Chola.

Puru has had a lifelong fascination for temple architecture, taking on a five-year diploma in Architecture and Sculpture from the one and only College of Traditional Hindu Architecture and Sculpture at Malappuram, Tamil Nadu, India, and a three-year specialised degree in Traditional Architecture and Sculpture from the University of Madras.

He came to Australia with vast experience, having designed Dravidian Chola style temples in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, USA Singapore and Australia.

"All the granite used in the temple was sourced from a single quarry, in Namakkal near Salem, Tamil Nadu," he explained. "This was done to ensure uniformity in colour and texture. The stones varied in size and weighed between 200kg and 6 tonnes each."

The main temple tower is carved out of a single giant stone, weighing 6 tonnes and 1.19 metres in diameter.

(Called the *'vimana'*, the main temple tower is typically shaped like a pyramid, rising in steps geometrically.)

Nearly 100 artisans worked on the statues, in three different sites in Tamil Nadu.

"They took a year to create - cut and carved in intricate designs. It then took six months to assemble here in Australia."

Besides the pyramid, Dravidian temple architecture requires that the building be contained within a compound wall; have a gateway in the centre of the front wall; a raised platform to enter the main door *(mandapa);* sculptures of fierce *dvaarpaals* or sentries guarding the main door, and a cupola to crown the pyramid at the very top (*vimanam or shikher*).

All these elements at Lord Ganesha's newest home in Melbourne, are built in granite.

Balaa observed, "The original plan for granite was restricted to the main shrine *moolasthanam,* but so overwhelming was the support from our members and devotees, that we decided to go for granite for all eleven shrines in the temple. Taking into account the Australian works, which included, new roofing, new steel structure, new flooring, the various extensions both at the rear and for the *Vasanthamandpam,* this raised our costs from $2.5 million to $4 million."

It also became a mammoth task for Puru.

the ninth day, in which the temple deity is taken out on the city streets. A grand chariot built in the tradition of the ancient Hindus is used for this purpose. The spectacle of it all makes it an iconic event for the area.

Today the Association has around 285 members, and thousands of devotees come for many of the main functions such as the Vinayagar Sathurthi in September/October. Numbers have grown substantially in the last five to ten years. (The 2016 Census of Population and Housing showed that the number of Hindus in Australia had increased by 60% since the previous Census in 2011.)

"The development projects at the temple have all been self-funded," Balaa kandiah stressed. "Not a single penny has come from the government, except for the building of our multipurpose hall for which we received a $200,000 grant."

Three temple priests conduct the worship, explaining the rituals to the younger generation in English.

Besides worship, the temple also participates in social justice programs in the mainstream including the Knox City Council's annual festival. It boasts a 30-year relationship with the Salvation Army and organises volunteer programs such as during the recent bushfires.

"As COVID struck, we could not unfortunately offer our services to the wider community as we became a building site rather than an operating temple," Shan lamented.

Even though the third consecration planned for this year is now postponed thanks to COVID, Shan and Baala prefer to look at the bright side of it all.

"Puru has been working on the construction for 18 months since 2018, travelling frequently between India and Australia. When he arrived back in Melbourne earlier this year with 20 of his artisans for the final build, it was only a week before lockdown was announced."

Another of Ganesha's miracles, no doubt.

The current Temple committee comes with great experience and talent, many members currently working as civil engineers and architects, in senior management as well as early career roles. Shan and Balaa themselves retired from senior management roles in the corporate world and are now fully devoted to the temple cause.

As for the many "miracles" that have dotted the entire journey of the temple's latest redevelopment, you'll have to wait till the grand opening: a magnificent coffee table book has been planned to reveal all. It promises to be the ultimate tribute to Vignahaara, Remover of Obstacles.





Shan described seeing the designs on paper early on. "Each stone was numbered; its position, clearly specified, and its dimensions precisely listed. It was a massive jigsaw puzzle. I couldn't even begin to imagine the amount of thought that went into it all!"

Balaa added, "Now that we have seen the completed structure though, we can't tell where the stones meet, it all looks like one single piece."

The joining process is the same as that used by our ancestors, Puru described. "The stone is hollowed out so that the load falls to the sides. The edges are made coarse, and 'milk' (*paal*) made up of very fine cement and water is used as the binding agent."

Puru's drawings and designs were sent to IIT Madras where the calculations were verified and validated; the certifications provided were approved by the Australian authorities.

"Apparently the structure can withstand any earthquake," Shan revealed.

What challenges, if any, came up in the development process?

"A major challenge was sourcing the granite," Puru revealed. "The Indian government is restricting the amount of granite that can be exported. Our shipments were among perhaps the last few that could get out."

Quarantine service was another road bump, Shan added. "As the carved structures were loaded on to trucks in India for the transport, heavy floods hit the area. When the shipment arrived here, it was covered in leaves and mud. It all went into quarantine, and temple volunteers had to go out to clean the entire lot. It was quite an experience, starting at 4 am each day!"

"Luckily the wood was ok," Balaa offered. "Quarantine regulations had specified we use a particular type of wood packaging. It turned out to be the most expensive kind, so our costs went up significantly. But it was God's wish..."

The Sri Vakrathunda Vinayagar Temple's grand new makeover puts it in the same league as NSW's Helensburgh Temple and Murugan Temple which were built along similar lines – with traditional artisans designing in India or coming here to create the statues and pillars. Yet it would perhaps prefer to be in the same league as Adelaide's Ganesha Temple, which was granted heritage status in 2013.

Would the Vinayagar Temple seek heritage status too?

"It is certainly an idea we have toyed with," Shan admitted. "But that is in the future."

Originally scheduled for June this year, the consecration is now put off till the end of COVID restrictions.





