This article is supported by
Judith Neilson Institute
for Journalism and Ideas





MELBOURNE'S ganesha TEMPLE

The Sri Vakrathunda Vinayagar Temple set to create history with granite project

INDIRA LAISRAM // MELBOURNE

With its six-tonne single stone dome, similar to the Brihadeeswarar Temple, the Sri Vakrathunda Vinayagar Temple in The Basin, Melbourne, has almost completed its ambitious project of transforming the concrete temple into a granite temple. With granite works completed and finishing touches being added, the oldest traditional temple in Victoria and the only Ganesha temple now houses the largest granite shrines in the southern hemisphere, according to temple authorities. Due to COVID-19, a formal opening called the kumbhabhishegam is on hold.

The temple's history goes back to 1989 when a "breakaway" group from the Hindu Society of Victoria decided to build the very first Hindu temple in the state dedicated to Lord Ganesha, says Balaa Kandiah, president of Melbourne Vinayagar Hindu Sangam.

However, the task of bringing a deity from India to Australia was strewn with obstacles. But there came a 'surprising miracle' when Shan Pillai, treasurer of the initial pro-tem committee then, met Jayendra Saraswathi Swamigal of Kanchi Kamakoti Peedam, monastic institution for the Hindu community located in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu, in south India. Swamingal himself gave a new statue to Pillai, says Kandiah.

Having given the deity, the next most important thing was to buy a property to build a temple. This was again possible, thanks to the structure of the society, with trustee members contributing $20,000, life members $5,000 and ordinary members $1,000 each to purchase land from a disused Anglican Church.

Initially, the Vinayagar deity was kept in a house of a trustee Somasundaram in Templestowe where the priest Gnanasekara Kurukkal came down once a month from Sydney to perform pooja in the house. Somasundaram would do the daily Abhishegam (bathing of the divinity to whom worship is offered) for the deity with a monthly major puja done in a nearby hall, says Kandiah.

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>
> **BALAA KANDIAH** // PRESIDENT OF MELBOURNE VINAYAGAR HINDU SANGAM

"From these humble beginning in 1989, after many fundraising activities, the committee was able to raise enough funds to lay its first foundation stone in November 1991," says Kandiah.

The building works progressed at a great speed and the first consecration ceremony, the Maha Kumbhabhishegam, was held on 11 October 1992. In 1995, a community kitchen was established and began serving all free meals during major festive occasions and South Indian cuisine for lunch and dinner.

The temple held its second consecration ceremony, Purnaravarthana Maha Kumbabhishegam, on 17 June 2007 after expansion works whereby a new Raja Gopuram (monumental entrance tower, part of which was in granite) and new shrines for Durga and Murugan were built.

The next year in April, the temple launched Mahotsavam, the annual 10-day annual pilgrimage and a chariot was built to be taken on the roads of Melbourne on the ninth day of the festival. Interestingly, in 2013 the traditional chariot built in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, was brought to Melbourne. Since inception, this event has become an iconic event in the city of Knox, where the temple is located, attracting thousands of devotees and locals in the area as well.

"This is the only temple in Australia that take its chariot on the road once a year in April," says Kandiah.

The temple is now its way to creating history by becoming the first granite temple and housing the largest granite shrines. Work began in July 2018 and the third consecration ceremony was scheduled for June this year, which has now been shelved due to the coronavirus. "We now await the outcome of the COVID-19 lockdowns before fixing a new date," says Kandiah.

Elaborating on the project, Kandiah says that Purushothaman Jayaraman, who built the original temple, was hired to carry out the works. "The shrines were designed by Purushothaman and



Top view of Ganesha Shrine



Architect Purushothaman Jayaram

hand crafted from solid granite. They were shipped to Melbourne from Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu. The artisans then came to Melbourne and assembled the entire shrine stone by stone. Today, on the cusp of completion, the shrine is indeed an architectural marvel, from design to shrine."

When the work was initially conceived, only the main Ganesha shrine was going to be converted to granite. "Due to the overwhelming support from the community, all 11 shrines have now been transformed into granite. This has meant that the budget went from $2.5 million to $4 million," says Kandiah.

Today, the number of devotees from all over Victoria, including many from regional areas, that throng the temple run up to thousands with an average 100,000 every year.

"There are over 50 temples dotted around Australia and 19 of them are in Victoria. As this is the only Ganesha temple in Victoria and Ganesha being the pre-eminent deity in the Hindu pantheon (as all Hindus pray to Ganesha first before embarking on any quest), hence the rise in the number of devotees," says Kandiah, adding, "There are no restrictions on anyone coming to the temple, so long as they respect our rules of entry, such as no shoes, no inappropriate clothing etc."

With the coronavirus leaving an indelible mark in the community's psyche, Kandiah says devotees will be expected to now wash their hands (not just their feet) before entering the temple. "More care will be taken to ensure proper distribution of the prasad, bearing in mind the effects of carelessness. We will consider more appropriate measures as recommended by the Australian government as the country comes out of COVID-19."

In conversation with temple architecture Purushothaman Jayaraman

What is the architectural design of the temple and what is the historic transformation?

The temple was initially constructed out of bricks mortar and concrete, very similar to modern buildings. It was the wish of the current management committee that the oldest temple in Victoria should be constructed from the traditional material that ancient Hindu temples are carved out of, which is granite.

It's a kind of 'living stone', the statues and the shrines capture the vibrations of the music, the chanting and the prayers conducted within the temple. It is a stone chosen by ancient Hindu temple architects and priests because this is the only stone where all five elements of nature—earth, water, air, fire and space—can be found. Hence you would find in all traditional Hindu temples, if they cannot have the entire shrine made out of granite, they will almost always have the deities made out of granite. It is also 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.

The temple is designed to precise mathematical calculations on paper to ensure that when each stone is laid, it is done in such a way that the weight transfer takes place to the sides of the structure. The drawings and designs were sent to the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chennai and the calculations were verified and validated by Unesco-approved civil engineers. They were then rechecked by qualified Australian civil engineers and appropriately certified. Hence, the temple has a pyramid-like exterior and hollow interior. The entire construction is similar to fixing a huge jigsaw puzzle, carefully and precisely measured and fixed.

"A combination of traditional and modern sculpting tools was used to carve every stone. The figurine is initially drawn on paper, then transferred onto the stone by way of markings"

PURUSHOTHAMAN JAYARAMAN // ARCHITECTURE

A combination of traditional and modern sculpting tools was used to carve every stone. The figurine is initially drawn on paper, then transferred onto the stone by way of markings. The stone is hollowed out using sculpting tools such as a chisel and hammer and modern stone cutting and grinding machines. Depending on the sculptures' imagination, intricacy and complexity of each design as well as the desired outcome, this process can take from a few days to months. At the end, exceptionally fine cement and water are used to hold all the pieces together which make the final form look continuous and flawless. Hand carved Ganeshas, elephants, peacocks, lions and lotus adorn the walls, corners and panels of each shrine.

In India, where the carving and sculpting was done, the project spanned three locations and involved more than 1,200 granite stones weighing from 200kg to six tonnes. Close to 100 artisans were involved in the work in India. The carved stones were then packed in expensive silver oak wood to avoid pests and shipped to Melbourne. In all, there were 10 such shipments. Once in Melbourne, specifically skilled stone masons were brought from India to assemble each stone to produce this magnificent temple.

Architecturally, what is the significance of the Chola temples of South India?

Architecturally, the temples built by the Chola kings dating back to the ninth to 13th centurt are splendours of Hindu architecture. One of the most famous of these is the Brihadeeswarar Temple in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu. This is a UNESCO-listed world heritage site. Our temple is constructed in this style. One of the most prominent features of this temple is the six-tonne single stone dome, similar to the Brihadeeswarar Temple, which has a dome which weighs around 80 tonnes.

It is a very ambitious project?

Indeed, it is an ambitious project. Projects like these can take many years to complete. It is with Lord Ganesha's grace that we have been able to do this work in an incredibly short amount of time. We have been working since July 2018 carving the stones in India. In Melbourne, since December 2019 we have been assembling them here. The granite structures have been fully assembled and completed. Currently the outside stucco works are being done to beautify the temple.

What were the challenges of re-creating a design where artisans, tools and materials come from outside?

The main challenges of re-creating a design during the modern age, are as follows:

1 Identifying the mountain from which the granite stones can be sourced and ensuring there was enough granite from that one mountain for this monumental task. All the stones used for this temple had to come from one mountain in Naamakal, near Salem.

2 Assembling the capable tradesmen from all over Tamil Nadu. At any one time, well over 100 people were working in three different sites in Mamallapuram, India.

3 Obtaining the customs clearance and all the associated paperwork for exports.

4 Identifying the right packaging material for shipping to Australia. This is primarily due to the strict quarantine requirements in Australia.

5 Packing the items according to the quarantine rules, including proper fumigation and certification.

6 Transporting the carved stones in open lorries from Mamallapuram to Chennai port and then to have it carefully packed in containers. Despite granite being a very strong stone, it is also very brittle and carved corners can easily be damaged in transit.

7 Clearing customs and quarantine in Melbourne, and finally shipping from Melbourne port to the Temple.

8 Obtaining visas for 19 workers to come to Melbourne to help in the assembly of the stones just as Covid-19 outbreak gathered pace in this part of the world.

9 Managing the entire building during COVID-19 outbreak and sending workers back safely when there are no commercial flights and quarantine rules imposed.