

Hindu Temple Rises in Ocean County

By: Victoria Ford



*Temporary Housing of the Idol.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford*

At last, after years of discussion, meditation and prayer, planning, fundraising and paperwork, construction is underway on a Hindu temple and Indian Cultural Center on a six-acre property on Route 9 in Toms River. The holy house and

auxiliary facility are intended to serve the existing Siddhivinayak congregation of approximately 850 families, with special focus on the next generation of worshippers, as well as the community at large.

Construction started Oct. 28, according to a message from the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Avinash Gupta. "I stopped by the site today and was overwhelmed with the speed and scope of work," he said in a message shared on Facebook on Nov. 11. The total fundraising goal was 70 percent met.

In the interim, a 3,200-square-foot warehouse will open by September and serve as the temple. That building will later become the cultural/community center, for hosting programs and educational speakers for kids, seniors and others. Prior to the land purchase and planning process, with no other temple nearby, Hindus in the Northern Ocean County area have had to drive an hour or more in any given direction to worship.

The message is: This is an open, inclusive place for all to come, where all are welcome, according to executive board member and board treasurer, Hira Suri, who orchestrated a recent gathering of the congregation's leaders and members for a tour of the grounds. The organization places no restrictions of any kind on who can appreciate, learn and benefit from the facility, beyond the expected adherence to basic protocol.

"Siddhivinayak" is another name for the elephant-headed god Ganesha or, rather, it is one state of Ganesha, who is known as the "first lord," the one who removes obstacles and fulfills desires and is the most universally relatable across the board. In the pantheon of gods, he is invoked at the outset of any venture or activity to eliminate hurdles, which is perfect for the group as it works to achieve its objective.

The ladies of Siddhivinayak also weighed in with their thoughts and impressions of the project and what it means to them. Sangeeta Mukhi said she wanted a place

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to worship close to home. Dr. Geeta Gupta, the board chairman's wife, said the large Indian community has long needed a centralized place, where there are opportunities for everyone, from education to yoga to dance. For Daxa Bhatt, the most meaningful part of the project is expanding the temple's reach beyond the Siddhivinayak community to be a part of and help the greater public community.

The new temple will measure 40,000 square feet and, artistically speaking, will be of a higher order. Once it is completed, Sanskaardham Pathshala, or school of tradition and religion, will be held every other Sunday, where students will study many aspects of their own heritage, including culture, values and the dozens of languages of India. In the meantime, classes have been held at Toms River High School North, under the direction of Dimple Shah. People have marveled at the hard work everyone has contributed to the children's school. About the educational component, she added, the children relish new understanding about the many festivals. They take pride in being knowledgeable about their own culture and religion.

Leadership comprises 26 trustees guided by a nine-person executive board. Board Chairman Dr. Avinash Gupta is described as a great leader, keeping everyone motivated and focused. A council brings vision and strategic perspective. The project is blessed by collaboration with another Siddhivinayak Temple in Mumbai, though the two are not affiliated in any way aside from a shared name. Nonetheless, a partnership has formed whereby a visiting trustee comes to give guidance and consultation, in a mentoring role. In three or four months the bylaws were established and tax-exempt/nonprofit status was obtained.

The end result of the project, as Gupta envisions, will be "a temple where our community can pray together and stay together; a cultural center where our children can learn our rich Indian culture and values and stay connected to our roots; a center where our



Ground Breaking Plans.
Photo credit: Victoria Ford

parents can find happiness; a center where we can celebrate and enjoy our festivals together; a center from where we can extend help to those in need, in the community where we live now and also in the community we have left behind in India."

The ultimate goal is to have a fulltime priest, who could perform rituals in a sacrosanct way and be available consistently to offer guidance and answer questions.

In Indian culture, religious teachings are absorbed at home from birth; as much as ever, traditions are strong among Indian youth, the men agreed. Through educational, ceremonial and social events, kids learn the explanations behind their beliefs, they explained. Usually the ceremonies are followed by a meal, called "prasada," blessed by a lord and offered to God, which attracts families and becomes a shared celebration.

In Hindu practice, nothing is ever negative or sad, Suri noted. Everything is a celebration.

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Here's a timeline:

About two and a half years ago it really “clicked” for a group of devoted followers, who were conducting some fundraising activities when one Dr. Anil Sharma gave voice to the preexisting undercurrent of need for a temple of their own. The “sankalp” – a Sanskrit word that loosely translates to a solemn commitment or intention of heart and mind – took root in February 2012 to build a temple in the name of Lord Sri Siddhivinayak. “(Sharma) was the catalyst for, ‘Why don’t we do that here?’” Suri explained. From there, the enthusiasm and momentum began to build quickly.

“We are a groundswell – a common desire,” he said.

From concept to closing the deal took about nine months, the men explained. The lot, which was in foreclosure, was purchased in November 2012, for \$655,000. The group spent \$100,000 on demolition of a house, garage, barn and pool (opting to preserve the solid L-shaped warehouse structure) and associated cleanup costs. An additional \$350,000 to \$400,000 was needed as of August this year. In the end it would be a \$1.3 million project.

In the opinion of Manu Bhatt, the father of founding member Parth Bhatt, the donations would start to pour in once construction began.

On June 1, 2013, bhumi-pujan, a groundbreaking ceremony, was performed before hundreds of devotees and community members.

The following month, shilanyas, the ceremonial laying of foundation stone, was performed by Shri Pravin Naik, the trustee from the Siddhivinayak temple in Mumbai. Also that month, the figure of Ganesh arrived (from the factory, inanimate and meaningless until ritualistically energized and made into an idol), as well as the gift of a kalash, or sacred water vessel, donated from the Mumbai temple.

In August of last year, Toms River approved the first phase of the plan, consisting of existing facility renovations and the creation of a temple and community center.

Fast-forward to this year: A devotee has taken the contract to build the temple at cost, Gupta announced. The organization has paid 25 percent upfront, will pay 25 percent midway and the remaining 50 percent upon completion, projected by the end of the year with a grand opening celebration anticipated early next year. The need for donations had reached maximum urgency.

“It is history in the making of Toms River,” Gupta said.

Donations to the temple can be sent by check, made out to “Siddhivinayak Temple USA” and mailed to the corporate address: 1916 Lakewood Road, Toms River, NJ 08755. Alternatively, visit siddhivinayaktempleusa.org and donate via PayPal.

Aside from fundraising as the biggest challenge, the congregation has also faced some obstacles in the form of skepticism and misconceptions about Hinduism. For one thing, Hindus really only have one God, who takes many forms, Suri said “just as the flag is not the country, the idol is not the god.”

Members of the Siddhivinayak organization are excited to see the support flowing; they look forward to the peace of mind it will bring, to the opportunities for prayer and meditation, to seeing everyone together in one place and to facilitating connections of every kind.

Editors Note: The Commission is in the process of organizing a public program on South Asian culture with Ocean County College. The program will be open to the general public and a fund will provide a bus stipend to the first Ocean County schools to make the request. The program could be offered as early as the fall of 2015.