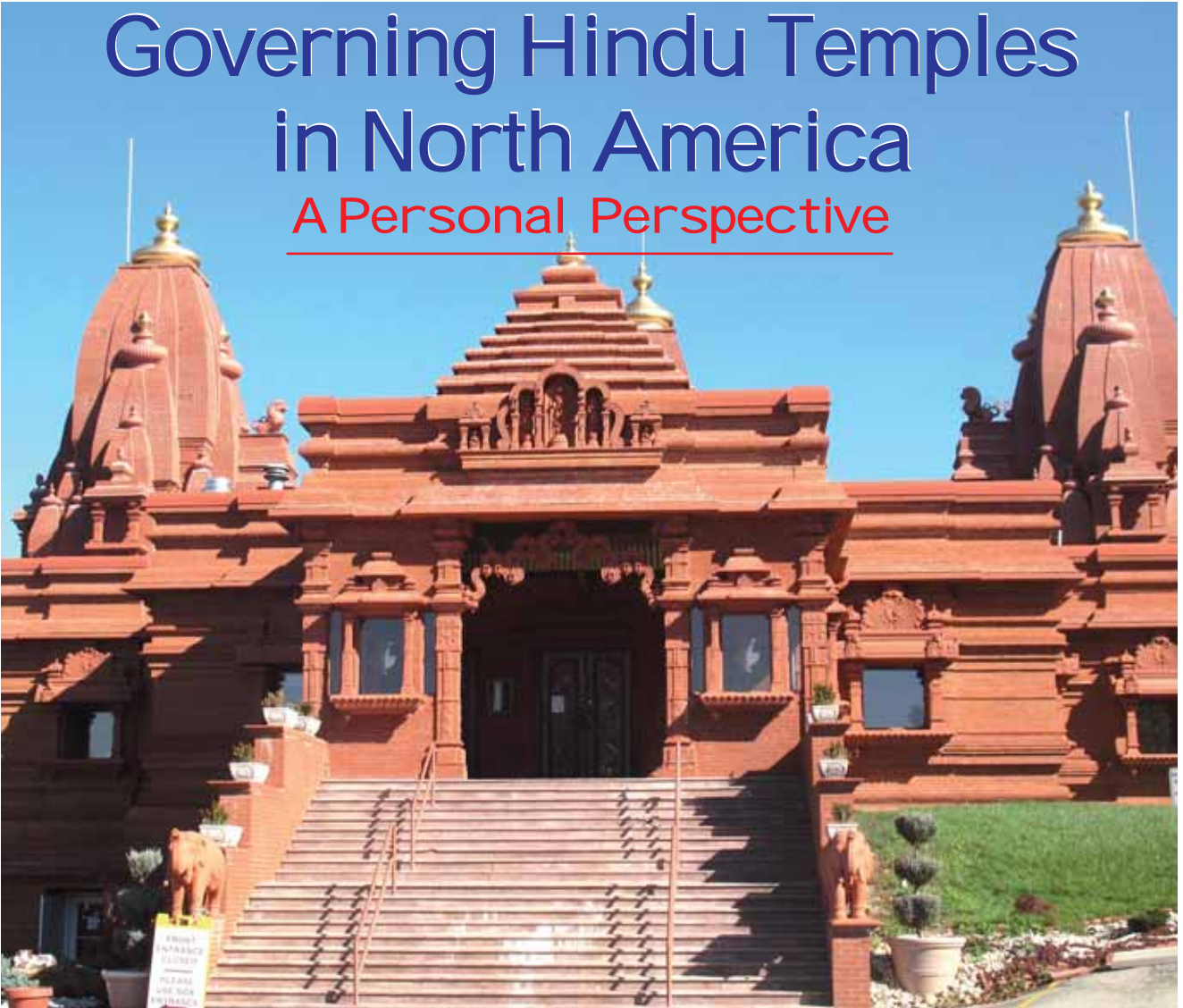


Governing Hindu Temples in North America

A Personal Perspective



Governing a Temple Part I: The Back-story

By Dr. Sheenu Srinivasan

Until the late 1950s, the immigration laws of the United States allowed immigrants to enter, live, work, and apply for citizenship here based on a quota system. Under this law, the annual quota for Britain was set at 65,000, while only one hundred were allowed to emigrate from India. With President Kennedy's initiative and at the urging of President Johnson, Congress abolished the system entirely and allowed up to 170,000 people worldwide to emigrate on a first-come, first-served basis. This law contributed to increasing the number of students entering from India in the 1960s.

With the new immigration policy in effect many of these students (including me) were able to work, marry, raise children, and settle here in the U.S. This development set in motion a series of sequential steps not unlike those taken by any other immigrant community. Yet there were some major differences with respect to this particular nationality. First, Indian immigrants are not a homogenous group; we came from different states in India and spoke different languages. The language we used to communicate with each other here was (and continues to be) English. Secondly, a majority of us were under

the impression that we would eventually return to India. For this reason, Indian communities in the U.S. were not so enthusiastic about setting up permanent institutions.

Temples belonged in that category. In ancient and medieval India, only the wealthy or famous saints founded temples. In modern India, the temple builders were millionaires. As ex-students, newly minted workers, parents, and mortgage-holders none of us fit those categories. My own experience was that the temple idea was not received by the community here in Connecticut with great enthusiasm in 1979. A handful of friends thought it was worth looking into. Most did not care for it. A few laughed at it. I recall vividly how one friend, after listening to my rationale for taking on this difficult task, asked, "Do you play tennis?" Another said that he could pray in his bedroom. Also, serious concerns were raised by a few about possible resistance from the so-called mainstream community; the fact that they were all descendants of immigrants from a different era played no part in our collective thinking. Other concerns focused on the expenditures involved and the difficulty of maintaining a temple that would satisfy all the requirements appropriate to a Hindu religious center. However, not all felt that way or considered the challenges insurmountable, and that made a difference.

The pioneering effort to build a traditional temple in New York City began under the leadership of Dr. C.V. Narasimhan and retired United Nations Under-Secretary General. Dr. Alagappa Alagappan. Dr. Alagappan, another devout Hindu, took the reins along with Narasimhan, to organize and establish the Hindu Temple Society of North America which was officially registered on January 26, 1970. The New York group chose the presiding deity to be, not surprisingly, Ganesha, the elephant headed god. Any Hindu undertaking of an auspicious nature invariably requires worship of this deity and so the choice was most appropriate for the very first sanctified temple in the U.S.

Not only was the New York temple planned with the active assistance of sthapatihis (traditional builders of temples) in India but also the deities, sculpted in India, were brought to Queens for installation. Artisans experienced in building temples were also brought to New York to construct a traditional Chola-style temple. Without a doubt the intent, content, style, priests, rituals and practices were of South Indian



origin. The consecration took place on July 4, 1977. This established shrine now attracts thousands of devotees each year. Furthermore, the Queens, NY experience served as an inspiration to Hindu communities in other states. And several communities felt courageous and took steps to provide a strong foundation to the succeeding generations of Hindus in America. As a result today every state in the union either has at least one sanctified Hindu temple or a possible plan to build one on the way.

This movement had success written on it. The rest is history as they say, except it wasn't. I only wish it were that simple. As it turns out, a quarter century of experience has taught us that the challenges we faced in organizing the community, and in planning and constructing a temple were relatively simpler than the challenges we face in governing them. I have come to the conclusion that the process was set up back in the 70s and 80s does not work. If it does in some temples I salute them and wish them continued success. The process I am referring to is the annual election that elects governing bodies. It simply does not work. Observing our own temple in Middletown, it is clear it shouldn't have worked and it didn't.

It doesn't work because the intended process was/is misinterpreted in a big way. Somewhere in the course of development of such projects it appears a sudden realization came about to some career-oriented folks that getting elected to a committee is a prestigious step worthy of mention in a resume. The notion that temple service is nothing more than a humble seva and total surrender to the Lord completely escaped those seeking such electoral office. We also made the honest mistake of writing into bylaws terms such as board of trustees, executive committee, officers, etc. The word executive was misinterpreted to mean what one understands in a corporate setting.

Back in 1979 when we defined the bylaws and



identified a board as the entity invested with assets and liabilities of the society our expectation was that an elder or two would assume this role for a brief period and perhaps develop policies, if and when needed, consistent with the religious goals of the group. We visualized a person to whom the members of the executive committee could go to should they need guidance. In fact the first person so honored was the late Swami Satchidananda of Pomfret, Connecticut. A year or so later we added a devout Hindu who stuck with us: Dr. V. Ranganathan. We couldn't have seen this group expanding to nine or, more unfortunately, developing a feeling of superiority relative to the executive committee. As a result tensions arose resulting in neither group focusing on religious issues central to governing a temple. Back in 1979 I had suggested the term dharmadarshees (guides to dharma) for a governing body but almost everyone thought our children wouldn't relate to such terms. There was a better alternative and it occurred to me only a little too late. If we had defined the person heading up the governing body as the First Servant I think things might perhaps have been different. Who would want to put that title in a resume?

We had to beg people to join a committee in the beginning (very early 80s) when we began a discussion of the temple concept. When at the end of the first year I insisted that someone else take my place to serve as president there were no takers. They all wanted me to continue. But I needed someone else because I had become the focus of the community instead of the project. We had to force a friend to step in. I distinctly recall his wife upset and sad when we made that decision in my living room. Everyone knew how much and how hard the work involved would be. It was only when it became clear to the community that there was a high probability of the temple actually taking shape that some interest developed. Even then it was nothing like what we have seen in sanctified temples in the past couple of decades: the intense, open, combative, competitive desire to get elected. Campaign letters are mailed out to the membership, alliances are formed, telephone calls are made to secure the votes. Everyone promises to work hard. A common observation is that on the day of the election members rarely seen at the temple show up for the duration, vote for their candidate and vanish. No qualification is defined to contest in an election. Membership is all that is needed. Elections are held to serve on a body, not to serve a particular function.

Suggestions are openly made that we need to have a Tamilian or a Bengali or some other sub-ethnic group. The language affiliation took on a serious role. Slowly but surely it took on a completely political format leading to protecting the interests of sub-ethnic groups. The religious/spiritual aspects of a holy place yielded almost entirely to calculated efforts to assert one language faction or another. This wasn't the end of it. Factions within factions played havoc. Undercurrents of caste loomed large although quietly in the background. As a result, arguments, accusations, counter-accusations, fights, police complaints, law suits - all- have turned the sacred into a cesspool. Even the most biased person will admit that the process of governing has failed.

Records of meetings, if they exist at all, will exhibit dysfunctional governing bodies. It is not just that differences of opinion exist. The problems go even deeper. It is not an exaggeration to state that the word congeniality is foreign to those who serve on committees. It is not dislike, it goes even lower. Hatred within committees and between committee members is the term that often describes the atmosphere. If that is not your observation, you are blessed indeed.

None of this would matter if it were not for the succeeding generations of American Hindus who are growing up in this hostile environment who someday will have to inherit and manage these institutions.

But there is a ray of hope which could provide an opportunity for all those interested in serving to do so with little conflict. That process is indeed the focus of this paper. The secret is to replace the electoral approach with the pure, simple, and unadulterated common sense approach of seva based on bhakti. That is the process I shall present in the second part of this essay. In the system I propose no one who has the genuine interest, talent, or knowledge to perform a task will be omitted. It will involve a larger number of families than the current systems but more important their service will be intense and for a short period as will be discussed in the next two parts of this paper. ■

*About the author: Dr. Srinivasan is the Founder of the Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple Society. Some of the introductory remarks in this paper are also found in his 2011 publication, *Hinduism for Dummies* (Wiley Publications/Consumer Dummies, 2011).*

Also visit www.avsrinivasan.com to read a preliminary history of the Satyanarayana temple.