

Governing Hindu Temples in North America



Part II: A Proposed Model

By Dr. Sheenu Srinivasan

The model to govern a Hindu temple described below is driven by the following facts:

- ❖ Members who initiated temple building efforts have mostly reached the senior age group now and therefore their interest as well as other adult members of any temple is (should be) focused not on themselves but their children and grandchildren.
- ❖ The succeeding generations can keep a temple as a support institution for spiritual/religious experiences only if they are taught/trained in the traditional sampradayas which were the basis at the time of sanctification.
- ❖ As discussed in part I of this paper any system based on electing members of governing committee/s invoking ethnic/sub-ethnic considerations has not

worked.

- ❖ Elections, by definition, mean making choices. Those who attend such meetings decide that some devotee is better to serve the Lord than someone else. How can that be? Every human being, irrespective of his/her station in life, gender, looks, age, profession is the same in the eyes of the Lord. And the Vedas declare that each soul is potentially divine. So how could we tolerate a situation wherein one devotee is discriminated against another? Especially in a temple to which people come mainly because that is one place where they are in the presence of God as an equal to any or everyone and nothing else matters.
- ❖ What can winning or losing mean in a religious setting? Yet the community declares that an individual "lost". And it must make the "loser" unhappy, jealous, feel unworthy, angry, frustrated and disappointed;



words that simply do not belong in a temple of all places. Does every loser feel this way? Who knows? We are only humans and most likely do feel that way with perhaps varying intensities.

❖ A sense of joy, a sense of belonging, a sense of dedication, a sense of strength, a sense of comfort, a sense of confidence are and should be the governing words and the experience of temple membership.

❖ Bhakti and Seva practiced in the capacity of a devotee to offer humble, dedicated, selfless service to the Lord is the only way out of the mess that has consumed considerable energy leading to irreparable loss of friendships, lack of congeniality and an increasing level of general anti-social behavior.

❖ The most important hopeful sign that needs to be acknowledged and appreciated now is that a large number of temple families do indeed want to serve with little or no interest in seeking office and demonstrating their ego.

❖ We need to open up these opportunities to such families and replace the unwarranted concept of power and prestige with the true spirit of service to the Lord expecting in return nothing except God's grace.

❖ We must demonstrate through our attitudes in thought, speech and action a determined and yet humble desire to do seva in such a way that the priests will rise to the occasion and demonstrate their best skill in performing ceremonies and rituals.

❖ The one and only concern of the devotees should be to help maintain and observe the sampradayas established at the beginning, and develop further services to the community accordingly.

❖ Money should never be a parameter in our governing a temple. Time and again it is shown that an atmosphere of love, bhakti and seva will take care of any monetary issues.

❖ The most pressing concern and priority of every devotee must be to determine ways in which a peaceful, enriching, soul-stirring environment can be provided on a continuing basis day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year.

❖ Those who seek power and prestige must have realized over the past two decades that 99% of the temple visitors and a large proportion of the membership do not know/care who heads what. They come to the temple because that's what they did back home, and to now attempt to connect their individual souls to the Paramatman. One might therefore question the need for the concerns expressed here. The answer is simple: A bad model to govern Hindu

temples invariably leads to mismanagement and possible disasters. Case in point - bankruptcy proceedings initiated by a Hindu temple in Atlanta. I do not claim to know the details but what one reads in publicly available reports spells a sad saga of things getting out of control resulting in law suits and counter law suits. Thus our concern is genuine.

❖ The principal lesson of the past two decades is that it is essential we plan to seek service, do our seva and quietly step back.

❖ As it happens, a smooth functioning of a temple can occur by involving families that have the knowledge/interest/enthusiasm to do seva. In turn those families can get other families similarly involved, leading to a large reservoir of love, affection, humility, service without any expectation in return.

❖ This can be done with no one getting hurt and without anyone losing a chance to serve if they are willing to learn the basics of three essential functions that help maintain an irresistible draw towards the Lord.

❖ A sanctified temple has all the required features to feel the presence of the Lord, and equally important, it provides a unique opportunity to learn our traditional approaches to living on this earth.

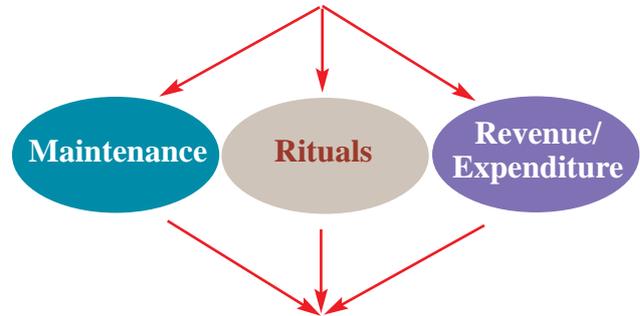
❖ The smooth functioning of a temple may be assured when protocols (priests, devotees, rituals and space utilization) are clearly defined and strictly adhered to. Let us observe, for example, the enviable discipline, calm atmosphere, order, focus on rituals, prayer, teaching, learning and service evident in temples run under the direction of (1) an acknowledged head of a sect (such as Swaminarayan Mandirs around the world) or (2) a monastic order (such as the Shaiva Siddhanta order in Hawaii). One derives a great deal of comfort visiting such centers. Those who are part of administering such temples simply follow instructions issued by the central authority and all is well. Clearly one cannot expect the same level of organization in a temple managed by laymen. That is understandable. That doesn't however excuse the other extreme of near chaotic scenarios that resemble governments mismanaged by extraordinary political rivalries.

Therefore I am proposing a model of governance by seva which will cover the three essential functions required in governing a temple: (1) Conduct of Rituals; (2) Crediting of Revenue; (3) Maintenance of Facilities. Social, charitable and educational outreach will be a natural development from this core of seva responsibilities.

A Seva Based Model of the Three Essential Functions

Annual Devotees Convention

- ★ 12 families pledge to donate one month of seva each for each module
- ★ A total of 36 families offer seva each year
- ★ Each seva module selects/elects one representative
- ★ Three such representatives constitute the Board of Dharmadarshees
- ★ The term for the BOD is one year



- 1 Representative is elected by each module**
- The Board of Dharmadarshees**
- 3 Members on the BOD serve 1 year term**

Key Dates and Associated Functions

Key Dates - Pre-Convention of General Assembly

All dates are as per temple schedule for the year

All actions noted below to be taken by the current BOD

OS = On Site

OW = On Website

- ❖ Makarasankranti - Publish list of current life members
- ❖ Shivaratri - One page nomination papers for Seva Modules
- ❖ Sri Ramanavami - Nominations certified and posted - OS- OW
- ❖ Krishna Janmashatami - BOD prepares next year's budget based on inputs from seva modules
- ❖ Ganesh Chaturthi - BOD posts budget and names of Seva Modules to be approved by the General Assembly
- ❖ Second Monday in September - General Assembly
- ❖ Approval of budget and modules by the General Assembly
- ❖ Third Monday in September -Approved budget and modules in place and posted - OS - OW
- ❖ Third Saturday in September to third Saturday in October --Orientation of Seva Module members
- ❖ Diwali - Seva Modules and the new BOD declare their commitment and present their plans

Modules ready, Budgets approved, community ready for the New Year

The model illustrated above is a work in progress, inviting recommendations and suggestions for further study. Seva Schedule:

A period of thirty days per family is the requirement. Thus during one year 36 families will offer seva as First Servants. Each such family recruits other families to work with them for a smooth transition to the next month and beyond on a rotational/convenience/choice basis.

The three essential Seva functions are:

1. Assure proper conduct of rituals scheduled for the period of your seva.

Rituals Seva requirements:

- ❖ Knowledge about the pujas to be performed during the tenure
- ❖ Ability to communicate with the priests with respect
- ❖ Ability to assess the material needs for the ceremonies
- ❖ Procuring material, proper use and disposition of materials
- ❖ Maintaining an accurate record of materials bought, used and stored



- ❖ Full report of funds committed with signature posted on website within a week of completion of tenure

2. Assure proper crediting of revenue for the period of your seva.

Revenue Maintenance Seva requirements:

- ❖ Knowledge of and experience in accounting procedures
- ❖ Ability to be rigorous when it comes to public funds
- ❖ Ability to be punctual to make weekly (four) deposits during the tenure
- ❖ Ability to keep and post an accurate record of collections on the day of deposit
- ❖ Full written report of funds deposited (cash, checks, credit card payments), bank deposit receipts with signature posted on website within a week of completion of tenure

3. Assure proper maintenance of the facilities for the period of your seva.

Assets and Facilities Maintenance Seva requirements:

- ❖ Knowledge of areas that require daily, weekly and long term hygienic care and maintenance
- ❖ Ability to organize, schedule, guide, and manage cleaning crews
- ❖ Accurate record of personnel serving, hours served and problems identified
- ❖ Assisting priests in maintaining sanctums
- ❖ Assessing, directing timely collection and removal of waste material throughout the campus
- ❖ Full written report of activities organized and managed along with problems needing care posted on the website and on site at the completion of tenure

Seva outreach requirements in connection with community information processing such as phone messaging, website maintenance, event scheduling, Sunday school, classes, library, publications may be outsourced to professionals under contract.

Disbursement of Cash/Checks Seva Requirements:

Based on experience in the past years and discussions with the priests, each module prepares, on the day of the annual meeting, a list of expenditures typical for each month. This data may be considered as fixed expenses (utilities, salaries, puja materials, contracting for snow removal and other routine maintenance etc). In addition variable expenses such as installation of special equipment, tents, food service during festivals are noted and made part of the proposed expenditure for the month. A request for approval is made, on the third day after the annual meeting, by each module to the member of the board representing the Finance module by email, copying all members on all modules and posted on the website. The modules may consider these as approved if no objection is raised in writing from the board during the first week.

The BOD, acting on a timely basis, may review the requests and proceed with reimbursement unless there are wide variations in the requested amounts. All requests for reimbursements are to be made to an accounting firm engaged by the society after inviting bids and selected by the general assembly on a yearly renewable contract or over a longer period. Checks are to be written only once a month by the firm on behalf of the society upon receiving such request by email from the BOD member representing the Revenue/Expenditure module and followed by a letter with signatures of the three members of the BOD. A copy of such correspondence is posted on the website and on site.

Vesting assets and liabilities/Legal requirements for a 501(c)(3) organization.

Temples built from a large number of small donations and some large donations in the early 70s and 80s now have become multimillion dollar properties. This didn't even enter our minds as we struggled to get the project



moving. Liability was somewhat scary and is the issue that led us to conceive of a group of well-to-do individuals who were urged to serve as a (then unelected) board of trustees. The spirit of the concept was lost, as discussed in parts I and II.

In the system I am proposing now, each seva module either agrees to select unanimously a representative or elect one for a one-year term. The three such representatives are the ones who stand in readiness to assist (not direct) any family should they ask/need help during their tenure. Each of these also serves their month like anyone else. In addition, they constitute themselves into a Board of Dharmadarshees and it is this board in which the society vests the assets and liabilities of the temple. A multimillion dollar insurance policy may also serve to address and protect the BOD entity from liability related issues.

I do note that there is a possibility of contested election at the module level unless there is unanimous consent. First of all the process is needed by the requirements of a 501c (3) organization. Secondly the risks are minimal because the work is limited to a month of intense engagement by each family. And the BOD will

be required to provide whatever assistance/guidance is required by each module. This imposes the need to work together in a faster pace to do seva. The term of the BOD is a single year. More important than any of these is the planned voluntary participation to serve by a large number of families. It should work. Let us hope so in the interest of our children and grandchildren. ■

*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.

Take up one idea. Make that one idea your life - think of it, dream of it, live on that idea. Let the brain, muscles, nerves, every part of your body, be full of that idea, and just leave every other idea alone. This is the way to success.

Swami Vivekanand