

AMERICA VARSHE AMERICA KANDE

Hinduism, Ornament, and the Suburban Box



IN 1983, WHEN I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, MY FAMILY WENT ON A ROAD TRIP from our home in Mobile, Alabama, to Houston, Texas. My parents took me to two landmarks. One was the Astrodome, where I saw the Astros lose to the Cubs. The second was the Sri Meenakshi Mandir, one of the first Hindu temples in the United States and among the first in the South. The Meenakshi Mandir is located on what was, in the early eighties, the outskirts of Pearland. We must have taken the freshly laid Highway 288. I remember a huge Texas sun over farmland, and then—right after a stretch of trailer homes—the main temple tower rose up to greet us some 30 feet high and covered with icons of celestial beings.

Just imagine my perspective growing up Hindu in Alabama. The people around us, White or Black, Baptist or Pentecostal, didn't know what to make of little brown Hindu me. The monkey-brain-eating bad guys in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* were the only representations of Hindus many of them had seen. For that matter, the monkey-brain-eaters were among the only representation of Hindus I had seen. There was the *Guinness Book of World Records*, which features an embarrassingly high number of freakish Indians with titles like “Longest Fingernails,” but no Wikipedia to answer my questions about Ganesh's elephant head, no Bollywood movies on Netflix Instant Watch, no Dr. Gupta flashing a toothy grin on CNN.

My parents and the other Indians in Mobile, all of whom were in the first substantial wave of Indian immigrants to the United States, did their best to raise us with strong identities by reproducing holidays like Republic Day of India, Navratri, and Divali, as well as Easter, July 4th, and Christmas. We met in family rooms with the couches pushed against the wall. We met in school gymnasiums. We met at the Jewish Community Center on Sundays. However, I had never beheld a monument to our culture in the United States, never experienced a place with our iconography, a place with bonafide Hindu priests, a place that served our food—in short, a place of our own.

Though I was tired after the long drive from Alabama to Texas—the

outskirts of Pearland no less—I knew the temple visit had great significance. It demonstrated that we too had a stake in America, that we could assimilate, retain our core beliefs, and make an impact through our culture.

Fastforward. I now live in Houston and am the editor of *Cite: The Architecture and Design Review of Houston*. The publication is almost as old as I am. In fact, it was launched the year I visited Houston as a five-year-old. When we digitized the archives, lo and behold, I found a brief review of the Meenakshi Mandir from 1988 (available at citomag.org).

The reviewer, an architecture critic based at Texas A&M named Malcolm Quantrill, ridiculed the temple for its “confusion of scale” because it is “a suburban miniature version” of a temple compound in Madhurai, India. He calls it a “brick-and-concrete reproduction of history [that] is neither true to size nor material.” Quantrill saves his most cutting wit for the interior: “We find ourselves inside a flat-ceilinged suburban box, an impression unchanged by the profusion of gods. The holy water and incense might remind me that these Catholic practices have a Hindu root, but the overall effect is of a Tupperware party in Tomball.”

I am tempted to be offended, to condemn the review for insensitivity. The only problem is that Quintrell was right. I can, in fact, heap on more details. For example, in India, you would be hard put to find a temple that crams in as many different gods and goddesses as the Pearland Meenakshi Mandir. Though Hindus believe the divine takes thousands upon thousands of forms, typically any given temple is devoted to only one form. A Ganesh temple. A Kali temple. A Krishna temple. Pearland packs in deities popular in North India and South India, deities popular among divergent sects, both Saivite and Vaishnav, and even deities from Jainism, a religion in India arguably distinct from Hinduism.

Another problem with the Pearland temple is that it has no story about why it is where it is. All of India is, for Hindus, what Palestine and Israel are for the Abrahamic religions. Scriptures and folklore provide reasons for

BY RAJ MANKAD

the specific locations of many temples. For example, the Somnath temple is located on a site with a breathtaking view of the Arabian sea and is where the Moon god built a golden temple to Siva. The full story is a juicy one involving jealousy between lovers, a curse, and an explanation for why the moon waxes and wanes. Destroyed over and over again by Mahmud Ghazni and a host of other invaders, sultans, and emperors over its thousand-plus year history, it is the persistence of icon worship and the lore of the location that matter most. What's the story behind the location of the Meenakshi temple in Pearland—cheap property?

These problems with the Meenakshi temple all point to the tremendous challenge Hindus face in the United States. How are we really to reproduce a four thousand-year-old tradition, so deeply rooted in the land of its origin, so tied to specific building materials and practices, and so embedded in a social matrix of such complexity that it inevitably bewilders Americans? Christianity and Islam grew through evangelism and conquest, but Hinduism is a messy stubborn agglomeration that evolved where it always was.

Houston's Indian community in the late seventies and early eighties did the best they could with the money and expertise they had. In Pearland, they included so many gods and goddesses in order to draw in supporters from different communities, and thus to gather enough money to build, even if it was a suburban-box-miniature-doll-house version of the original with tile floors instead of marble and tupperware vessels instead of copper ones.

Now, in 2011, Houston has more Hindu temples than I can keep track of. The BAPS Swaminarayan Mandir, located in Stafford/Sugar Land and completed in 2004, stands out among all of them. It was designed according to Hindu architectural manuscripts known as the Shilpa-Shastras and constructed from Turkish limestone and Italian marble shipped to India where it was hand-carved in 33,000 pieces. When I visited the Sugar Land BAPS mandir, the wind blew through the columns. The open walls, the long passages leading to murthis, were indeed in perfect proportion. I was transfixed by a visceral memory of a visit I made to a lonely six-hundred-year-old Jain temple in Ranekpur, Rajasthan.

And yet, I prefer the “postmodern classic” Meenakshi mandir in Pearland over the reproduction of the ancient at the BAPS mandir in Sugar Land. I like ornamentation slathered on a suburban box more than Vedic proportions rendered in marble. Here's why. The make-do spirit of the 1980s Indian-American community was profoundly inclusive. The mash-up of divinities under a drop ceiling is a fuller expression of the humanist traditions in Hinduism than most temples in India.

The BAPS mandir in Sugar Land is a traditional mask for a sect that goes back only to the mid-nineteenth century, something like a Mormon Temple. The icons at the center of the temple are not of Ganesh, Shiva, and Krishna. Rather, marble carvings of the BAPS sect leaders sit in the most privileged spots. Adjacent to the temple of Turkish limestone and Italian marble, you will see the same steel beam construction in a moat of asphalt that the rest of Houston is made of. When the view of the temple includes those air-conditioned boxes that house lessons, dances, and receptions, you are faced with the same contradictions you see in Pearland. The India of the Shilpa-Shastras no longer exists, but we want to brace ourselves against a relentlessly fragmented world by invoking religious authority and teaching

our children moral values. The marble temple reproduction and the big box community hall, together, manifest the contradictions that, say, an Indian molecular biologist faces in raising her daughter with a strong connection to her heritage.

The huge parking lots at both the Pearland and Sugar Land sites are the defining departures from traditional Hindu temples in India. Traditionally, the visit to a temple was about the total experience—fasting and bathing ahead of time, collecting offerings, the journey to the site, the company of your fellow travelers, the sounds, the smells, and the lore. It is not the architecture that matters most but the unifying rhythm of life, all of it culminating in the witnessing, or “darshan,” of divine icons. In Houston, where we move from one air-conditioned bubble to the next, where the state does not support the construction of religious monuments, where bourgeois professionals drive the culture, it is no wonder that our temples are thin and insubstantial, closer cousins to Home Depot than Tirupati.

In his 1988 *Cite* article, Quantrill suggests Edwin Lutyens, the British architect of colonial Delhi, could have resolved the problems of the Pearland temple. The patrons of the Houston temples—doctors, lawyers, engineers, and business leaders raised in India—would likely balk at such a suggestion. Does the post-Indian Independence work of Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Charles Correa, and Balakrishnan Doshi offer any direction for spiritual spaces? No celestial nymphs adorn the High Court in Chandigarh.

Houston does have some alternative models. The Chinmaya Mission on Synott Road uses good proportions, a courtyard connecting the temple and classrooms, and a dome that doubles as the abstract form of the Siva Linga to good effect. However, if you want to see a place that exudes the raw spirituality of India, a place that doesn't bother at all with reproducing Indian architecture and doesn't need to, don't go to Pearland or to Sugar Land. Let me give you directions. Ride a bus to the Hillcroft Transit Center. I recommend the 132 Harwin line, which hurtles down the Southwest Freeway HOV lane. Or, if you must, drive a car to the Hillcroft exit. You are in what I consider to be the most vibrant part of the city, the omphalos, the “it” of Houston's wildly international mish-mash. Head north on Hillcroft. Pass the Chevron. Watch out for buses departing for Monterrey, Mexico. Pass Udipi Cafe. Pass Roop Sari Palace. Don't notice Babe's Cabaret strip club. Turn right when you see Raja Quality Restaurant-Sweets but don't stop there. Behind the Raja Sweets strip mall is an old office park, though “office park” conjures the wrong image. What you will see looks more like a series of storage units adapted into

little shops—a tailor, an eye-brow threader, a travel agent—and four places of worship. In the second row of units, across from a masjid, look for dozens of shoes that mark the door to the Sri Sirdi Sai Baba Jalaram Mandir.

Sai Baba was a man of unknown origins, widely believed to have been born Muslim, who lived in the early twentieth century in a tiny town outside of Bombay. Muslims and Hindus alike consider him to have been a saint. He lived in a shack, didn't own anything, and eschewed disciples and categorization. The lore of his miracles is extensive and the humble temple off Hillcroft has been the site of many reported miracles. I myself, as you might have determined, am not one for miracles, prayers, and straightforward spiritual faith, but I love to visit. The worshippers will welcome you, they may feed you, and they will tell you first thing that your being there is, in itself, a miracle. Or, they may express embarrassment and implore you to visit their new suburban location in Sugar Land. **c**

IN HOUSTON, WHERE WE MOVE FROM ONE AIR-CONDITIONED BUBBLE TO THE NEXT, WHERE THE STATE DOES NOT SUPPORT THE CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGIOUS MONUMENTS...IT IS NO WONDER THAT OUR TEMPLES ARE THIN AND INSUBSTANTIAL, CLOSER COUSINS TO HOME DEPOT THAN TIRUPATI.