



The Times

Idol unveiled at Lawrence temple

Monday, June 29, 2009

BY KRISHNAN VASUDEVAN

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

LAWRENCE -- On an ordinary Sunday, approximately 50 people come to the morning service at the Radha Krishna temple here. Yesterday, however, over 300 people came to celebrate the unveiling of a new idol in recognition of Hindu saint, Sri Sai Baba.

The statue was unveiled at exactly 11:37 a.m., the auspicious time, according to Hindu astrology, in a ceremony called "Pranpratish tha," which translates to installation of an idol. A Hindu priest blessed the Sai Baba statue, which was installed on the temple patio, with traditional prayer ceremonies throughout the morning.

Once uncovered for the public, devotees had an opportunity to pour holy water on the statue as an offering of their love to the saint. The event was especially momentous because this is the first Sai Baba statue in Mercer County for the local Hindu community.

"It will bring lot of people, a lot more people," said Dr. Prakash Sharma who co-founded the temple with his wife in 2002. Sai Baba, which loosely translates to holy father, was born in 1838 and combined both Hindu and Muslim ideas in his religious teachings.

Along with having reportedly performed countless miracles, Sai Baba is most known for rejecting the Hindu caste system, and for bringing harmony between people of different faiths.

Lawrence mayor Pam Mount, who was one of many local politicians on hand, echoed Sai Baba's teachings in an impromptu speech. "We really appreciate the effort you've gone to to build your temple and to bring everyone together," said Mount. She added that as the temple grows in the area, the congregation will have an opportunity to teach more people about their religion as well as learn about other faiths practiced in Mercer County.

Other politicians present were Assemblywoman Linda Greenstein of the 14th District, Assemblyman Upendra Chivukula of the 17th District, and councilman-elect Kamal Khanna of West Windsor.

While the three-ton marble statue made its way from being handcrafted in Jaipur, India to a shipping yard in New York, a lot of work was done back home in preparation. For nearly three weeks volunteers built a new patio, constructed a gazebo to house the statue, and set up multiple tents for yesterday's festivities.

When the statue was ready to be erected it took nearly 20 people to roll it to its spot in the center of the gazebo. "In spite of the rains volunteers stayed here past midnight Friday night to get it together," said Tarun Mandhania, a member of the temple. The entire operation was funded by devotees of the temple, some giving up to \$500 donations.

Unlike the other idols which will be installed inside the temple itself, Sai Baba will remain on the patio. "Baba used to generally stay in the open underneath a tree," said Sharma. The saint often is depicted sitting under a tree, with one hand facing out, as to bless whomever is looking at him.

The statue, which was adorned with flower garlands, was visible from both Lawrence Station road, and southbound N.J. Transit trains on the Northeast Corridor.

Sharma may be right in predicting more devotees to his temple. Though Hinduism believes that multiple gods are facets of one single power, many people focus their faiths on certain deities like Radha and Krishna. Sri Sai Baba, however, is given credence by all Hindus alike. With the nearest Sai Baba temple in Edison, Sunday morning service at the Radha Krishna temple may have a permanent uptick in devotees.

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