

# **The Albany Hindu Temple: A Sacred Space**

Stephen J. Boese

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## **Introduction**

The Albany Hindu Temple of Albany New York is a welcoming sacred space in Loudonville, New York, near the City of Albany. It is a spiritual hub for a primarily first generation south Asian immigrant community in a tri-city region often referred to as the capital region, encompassing not just Albany, but also the Cities of Schenectady and Troy, and stretches as far north as Saratoga, and includes many suburban and exurban communities. It is a true community temple, and does not share ownership nor is it under the auspices of any other spiritual organization. It operates with the support of a devoted community, volunteers, general fundraising activities, and generous contributions from committed donors. The content for this essay is drawn from personal experience and discussions with temple leaders including the temple priests discussed below, and Tarun Narruvula, the current Chair of the Board of Directors. It also draws from knowledge gained by my participation in the Oxford Center for Hindu Studies course, “Hindu Temples” during the Fall of 2020.

The Albany Hindu Temple has its origins in late 1975, when a group of like-minded families came together to form a not-for-profit organization and make a commitment to creation of an Albany area Hindu Temple. The following year saw the organization’s establishment as a New York State 501(c)3 entity and their purchase of a farmhouse. This farmhouse, with volunteer labor, was the first Albany Hindu Temple. By 1990, the organization had grown to where, with an initial investment of roughly \$800,000, they supported and initiated the construction of a new temple, the current building that now stands in Loudonville. It opened during Diwali of 1991. In 2001, a community center was built and opened adjacent to the center.

To most in the greater capitol region community, the Albany Hindu Temple is largely unknown, or perhaps vaguely recognized as a somewhat mysterious religious organization. To the temple community, it is a rich and rewarding spiritual space, and the center for Hindu devotion, practice of ritual, darshan, meditation and contemplation. It is a powerful spiritual space where an individual and his or her relationship to the divine may mix with a community in worship, contemplation and practice. As I suspect is the case in many communities, there is a curious divide in the capitol region where “secular” centers cater to many providing instruction on yoga asanas and meditation, perhaps in a room adorned with images of popular deities. Some even provide instruction on sacred texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras. Yet a place where the larger Hindu community practices their devotion remains mostly unknown and unexplored.

## **The Building**

From the outside, the temple has an unusual appearance from its suburban residential surroundings. A warm ochre colored concrete building stands off the roadway with an unusual tiered copper colored dome and two similar tiered structures over two entranceways. This dome and the entrances evoke the

towers, gopurams or shikharas of the traditional temple, but it is inside the temple where the architecture is truly awe-inspiring.



The north facing entrance opens to the north facing devotional area, but typically, people enter from the east entrance, closest to the parking lot. After a few steps in one finds a northeast facing entrance to the mandapa or central common area facing the garbhagriha or central shrine. This entrance is closed since the imposition of COVID restrictions. A few steps more leads to a north facing entrance adjacent entrance to the assembly area to the right. To the left is the north facing entrance (or exit). Directly forward is another smaller assembly area for prasada, and also occasionally used as a secondary ritual space. Forward from that, is the temple kitchen.

It is upon entering the mandapa or main temple area that visitors are met with a unique and truly awesome sight. Across the open area is an authentic South Indian gopuram, constructed within the building. It towers maybe 20 feet high within the tiered dome seen from the outside. Beneath this gopuram are three garbhagrihas. In the center are murtis of Vishnu as Narayana and Laxmi. Facing left, is the garbhagriha for Ganesha. Facing to the right, is the Shiva Lingam. On each side of the opening for Vishnu and Laxmi are Dvarapalas. Along the walls of the mandapa are beautiful shrines for various deities.



*View from the entrance to the mandapa.*

The photo illustrates the approach to the beauty and magnificence of the gopuram and garbhagriha. The photo also shows the one frustrating design compromise. As the gopuram reaches up to the dome, its view is obscured by the ceiling that hangs before it. One needs to approach very close to the structure to get the visual perspective to see it in its entirety.





*View of the gopuram looking up from the base*

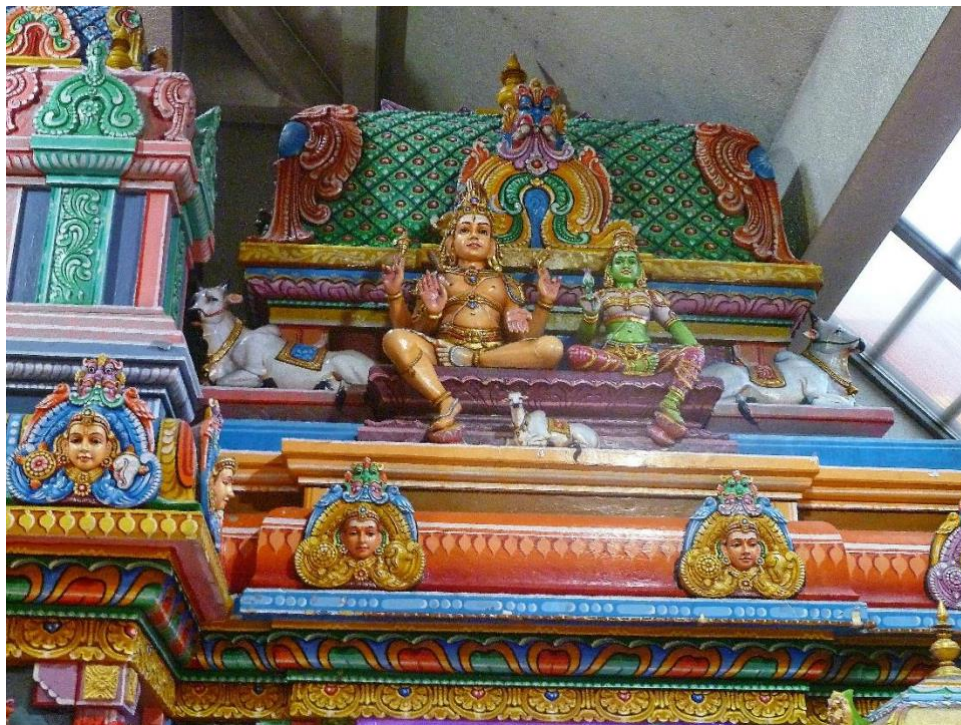
The gopuram reaches up to the center of the dome, which is a skylight, providing natural light shining down to the base. From its peak on down, vibrant colors alert the mind and awakens consciousness. The intricate detail, the meticulous coloring and the beautiful sculpting speaks to the glory of the divine. It is a spectacular human artistic endeavor to attract the divine to join us in this sacred space. It is said that this gopuram was imported from South India. It took four to six months for temple artisans to assemble and paint the structure in place. These colors have never been repainted and after nearly thirty years they remain vibrant and enchanting.

Vishnu and Laxmi are front and center, seated relaxed and peacefully. Laxmi holds a lotus. Vishnu with four arms holds the mace at rest, the chakra, and the conch. He holds one right hand up, palm facing the world, telling us, "no fear." A peaceful Garuda kneels in devotion at their feet.





*Ganesha*



*Shiva and Parvati*



*Dvarapala*

This gopuram is bigger than the sum of its parts. The deities, the dvarapalas and all the other angelic entities implore us lay aside our fears, cast aside the unreal to see the real, and to be at peace. It is hard to ignore the message in this presence.

### **Personal Reflections**

Albany Hindu Temple is dedicated to accepting and celebrating the diversity within the community. This commitment is readily apparent as one moves about the mandapa. Due to space limitations of this essay, not all the deities and not all of the components of this sacred space are included below. I have tried to illustrate some of the most meaningful aspects from my own perspective. This does not represent anyone's views but my own. I also do not intend to define or study a religion. Rather, this is my personal reflection and a snapshot of my thoughts about this space at this time.



## Ganesha

Ganesha sits proudly to the right of Narayana and Laxmi with his mouse sitting in front, gazing as we do at the deity. Here is a powerful presence, and I feel the protection as he removes obstacles to my spiritual well-being, and puts some obstacles in place where they need to be. Here, I am grateful for wisdom, grateful for an intangible presence, and grateful for protection. Almost like an ally. His presence, with stout body and elephant head is strong, yet oddly friendly. I think I understand why he is so popular and respected.





## Krishna and Radha

Radha and Krishna stand here, peaceful and comforting. Krishna tells me that we are eternal, that we ultimately have nothing to fear. Our calling is to act without attachment. Through non attachment we find peace. Looking into their smiling and peaceful faces is almost intoxicating. Their eyes tell us that we are protected and will find peace. The gentle smiles tell me that our troubles are momentary, but our peace is eternal.





## Navagrahas

Here stands the Navagrahas. They suggest to me that there are vast influences on our human material and spiritual lives manifest in celestial bodies are at once studied and known, yet on a trajectory that is alternately predictable but not predictable. We make our best decisions in recognition of the forces that universal, but ultimately know that the universal is not ours to own and control. And with that, I suggest that all is universal, so what is free of the universe? And what then do we ultimately control?



## Saraswati

Saraswati stands serenely and reminds me that life here and now can be sweet. Knowledge and culture are worthy endeavors. The music of our lives, the enjoyment of the arts, and the pursuit of knowledge are the celebration of the One. Life offers us a wealth of riches manifest in the creative and beautiful expressions of God through us.



*Saraswati*



## Durga

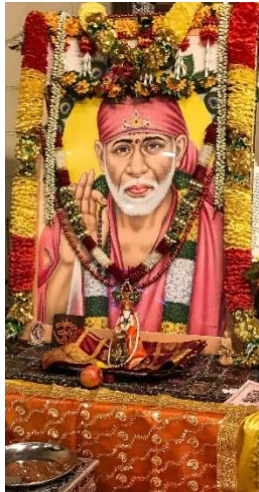
As I view, ponder and receive this representation of Durga, I am often literally struck myself with the power of the image. I find it so easy to take myself so seriously, and find it all too easy for my practice of devotion and discovery to be molded by ego. Often, I have stopped at this shrine and upon seeing Durga calmly slaying the demon bull Mahishasura, I am brought back to the reality that this demon bull of ego and excess runs within me too. Durga is here to slay the beast within me, if I will surrender and allow her.



*Durga*

### **Sai Baba of Shirdi**

A place for Sai Baba at the Albany Hindu Temple speaks not only to its inclusiveness, but also to the expression that the temple is a sacred space where the larger community is welcomed. Sai Baba devotees gather every Thursday for puja. As Sai Baba rejected the distinctions of class, caste, and religious labels, we learn that the community is broad and encompassing of all who are spiritual seekers.



### **Buddha**

Here, in a Hindu temple, sits Buddha. Here, Buddha is an avatar of Vishnu who became embodied at a time when the people desperately needed inspiration, and spiritual life was in need of reinvigoration. As with Krishna, Rama and the other incarnations, Lord Vishnu became manifest in a personal form to make the pathways to spiritual realization easier to understand and grasp. Buddha propounded a path

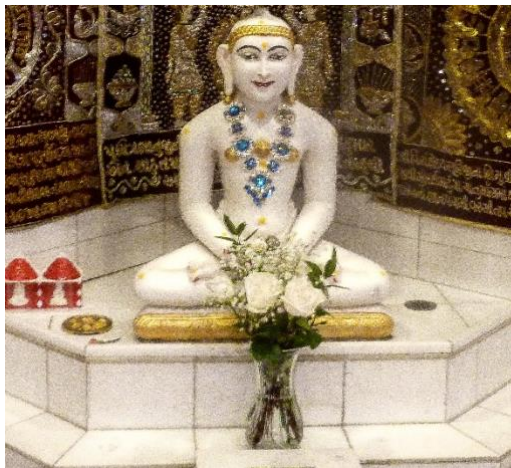




that was right for the time, and has resonated over millennia. The Albany Hindi Temple is a welcoming community, and Buddha is revered as part of the continuum of spiritual realization.

### **Mahavir**

Mahavir, founder of the Jains has his place here too. As with Buddha, he is recognized for his promotion of a path that is within the grand tradition. Here, Jains of the community find a place for darshan. When here, I see the peaceful and serene representation of the great teacher. I also resonate with the tradition of non-violence, and welcome that influence to my everyday life.



### **Rama, Sita, Laksmina, Hanuman**

The Rama family stands radiating peace and a comfort which speaks to me, and says that everything is as it should be and ultimately, all will be at peace for me. The trials of this group, through banishment, conflict, kidnaping, war and painfully, separation again as Sita is once again exiled to the forest. But from



the “big picture” perspective, these troubles are not even a drop in the ocean. Hanuman demonstrates absolute devotion to Rama, while knowing that ultimately, they are one. The story is about love, devotion and surrender, and some very hard, and very powerful lessons.

### **Vishnu and Laxmi**

In the central garbhagriha stands Vishnu as Narayana and Laxmi. They are at the center of the space and their place illustrates reverence for our preservation and protection. Laxmi represents to me the abundance of spiritual awareness, and realizing who we really are. Vishnu represents to me the commitment of God to the promotion of our spiritual awakening.



*Picture adapted from the temple website*



## Shiva

The Shiva Lingam stands in the main shrine, to the left of Vishnu and Laxmi, with its ever mysterious and beautiful presence. It reminds us that the eternal ever present Shiva is beyond our understanding. A mural of Shiva and Parvathi in their embodied and personal form reminds us that the eternal is personal as well. We cannot understand, but we can relate, if we let ourselves. Placed behind the lingam is a poster showing a personal representation in a popular style which once again shows us peace, confidence, and loving awareness. The Lingam and the personal manifestation exist side by side so that we will know, as Ramakrishna told us in so many words, that God is without limitation, both personal and impersonal. We ultimately cannot confine the eternal presence by just a symbolic representation or just a personal representation. Shiva is the Adiyogi. Shiva is represented by the Lingam. We can know Shiva personally, and we know that Shiva is beyond our understanding. Parvati stands to the left of the lingam. Her boundless devotion is strength and power, and tells me that such strength is available for all who put their energy to the right path. Facing the lingam is Nandi the bull. His peaceful loving gaze a source of inspiration and hope.



*The Shiva Lingam and Parvathi*

**The temple priests** are a source of inspiration and a prime example of devotion as well. They are also a diverse mix of extraordinary scholars, devotees and inspirational leaders. I am extremely grateful for their welcoming me to explore, learn and become part of this temple, and thank them for their instruction and acceptance.

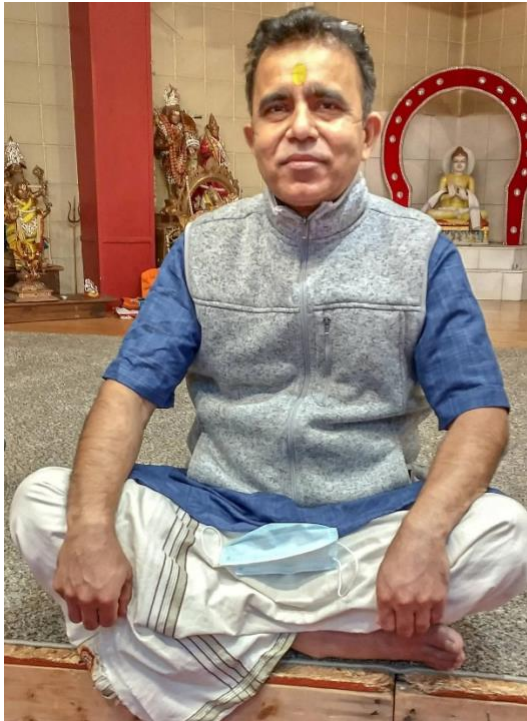


Sheedhara Jayateerthachar





Srinivasa Sharma



Ghanashyam Sharma

## **Conclusion**

The Albany Hindu Temple is a building and a community. It is a sacred space where individuals come together for darshan, private reflection and group worship. It exudes peace and acceptance. This essay did not even attempt to discuss the ritual and practices that also make this a place where ancient rituals are enjoined with new devotional spirit every day. That would be a much larger project. This essay is a glimpse to my personal reflection on a place, and its impact on me so far.