

**Making of a Hindu Temple: A Case Study of Sri Venkateswara Temple,  
Bridgewater, New Jersey  
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The subject of my research is the Sri Venkateswara Temple (also known as the Balaji Mandir) located in Bridgewater, New Jersey. It is a prototypical American Hindu temple in that it is conceptually ecumenical seeking to accommodate the several sectarian traditions under one roof, a concept not common in the Indian temple traditions. Architecturally built in the south Indian style, the temple houses several deities from the Vishnu, Shiva and the Goddess pantheon. In the "gallery of Gods", the presiding deity, Lord Venkateswara (a form of Vishnu), spatially located at the center towers over all other shrines. The icons themselves though predominantly fashioned in the south Indian style, include a mix of north Indian marble images. The temple rituals are organized in an elaborate fashion-its daily rituals include the recitation of morning invocation (*Suprabhatam*) and *Vishnu Sahasranamam* for the main deity, Venkateswara and ritual bathing (*abhishekam*) for Shiva linga. Weekly abhishekas are performed for other deities with Fridays reserved for the Goddesses. There are also biweekly and monthly abhishekas performed for the moveable icons (*utsava murthis*). The temple rituals are conducted in either Sanskrit or Tamil. The temple's sacred calendar includes practically all major and minor religious festivals of south India. The overall effect of the multiplicity of rituals and festivals is to create a place that is always busy and teeming with activities. Number of visitors average about three hundred per week. The temple also offers non-religious programs such as language classes, religious discourses and music and dance recitals. However, attendance in these events range from small to moderate, indicating that people come to the temple mainly to worship. Despite its popularity, not all devotees are comfortable with this model of temple worship-currently there are two projects under way in the state to build temples just dedicated to one deity.

The temple is ambitious in its building projects. In fact, it may be the only temple in the U.S to have consecrated its fifteen shrines all at once. Within a year of the *kumbabhishekam*, it completed the consecration of the tower (*gopuram*) and the flagstaff (*dvajasthambam*). Plans are currently under way to construct an enclosed walkway (*prakaram*) and to expand the old temple site which functions as the community center. Financially, except for the priestly staff, the entire temple management consists of unpaid volunteers. The temple trustees, elected annually by life members, are expected to put in certain hours at the temple every week. At present, the temple governance is in the hands of Telugu speaking Indians, a fact that seems to discourage active participation by other linguistic groups.

My research on the temple will focus on three areas:

**1. The History of the Temple:** Going beyond the narrative details, I will examine the decision making process that gave the temple its form and function. Some of the issues I will examine are:

- a. Did the idea for building the temple come from one person or a group? If it was a group decision what was the ethnic and gender makeup of this group?

b. Why was Bridgewater chosen as the site of the temple? What was its appeal? Was the decision to locate the temple at Bridgewater unanimously supported?

c. What was the reason for choosing a south Indian style architecture for the temple? Were there any differences of opinion in the type of temple that should be built? If so, how were they resolved?

d. Why was a Vaishnava god made the central deity? Was there an interest in making Shiva or Goddess as the principal deity? Why was Lord Venkateswara, not any other form of Vishnu chosen? Why were so many shrines built? How were the choices of which gods to include made?

e. Were there any theological issues raised in placing different gods under one roof? If so, how were they resolved?

**2. Financial Resources:** The complexity and the elaborate structure of the temple is likely to have made it a high cost structure. Some of the financial issues that will be explored in this research are:

a. How much did it cost to build the temple? What were the fund raising strategies used for raising the money? Was raising money a concern at any stage? Did the construction of the temple proceed according to the timeline? Was there any projects shelved for lack of funding?

b. Were there any major donors or backers for the temple? Did the presence of major donors result in certain aspects or projects given a greater priority than the others?

c. What are its major revenue sources? Are the revenues growing? Does the temple have a permanent endowment or plans for permanent endowment?

d. What are its major areas of expenditures? Are there any areas of financial concerns?

e. Are there any capital projects planned for the future? What are they?

**3. Governance, Administration and Membership:** As a recent transplant, the Hindu temple in America is still evolving. Its viability and success depend upon its ability to respond to the needs of its constituents. In this regard, some of the questions that will be researched are:

a. What is the administrative structure and how is its leadership selected? How diverse is its leadership in terms of language and sectarian affiliation. Is it representative of its membership?

b. What is the composition and the size of the temple membership? Has it changed over time? What is its demographic profile? Is it representative of the Indian population in New Jersey?

c. How are the decisions regarding the inclusion of rituals, hiring of the priests, celebration of festivals and the contents of the sacred calendar made? How does the temple administration determine the needs of its membership?

For this study, two research sources will be used: oral interviews with the present and former temple leadership, supplemented with official publications and internal documents and a survey of temple membership.