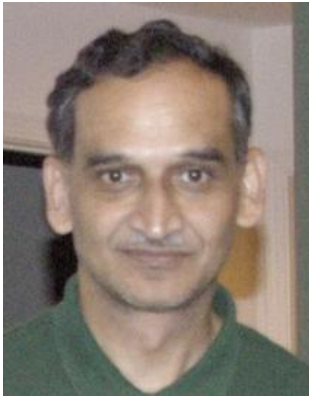


P. Ravi Sarma, Hindu Temple of Atlanta



P. Ravi Sarma is secretary of the Hindu Temple of Atlanta and one of its trustees. He is a medical oncologist with a private practice in Atlanta. Dr. Sarma is a leader in the Indian community and actively supports the arts as founder and current chair of the Indian American Scholarship Fund.

The Hindu Temple of Atlanta is a traditional South Indian temple, both in its architecture and in the liturgy of worship services conducted there. It has been operational since December 1990. Installation of *murthis* and their consecration was performed in May 1992. The principal deity is Lord Venkateswara. However, the temple follows both Saivite and Vaishnavite traditions. In fact, a Siva temple has been constructed and the consecration ceremonies took place in May 2004.

The temple is very busy during the weekends. Even though Sunday is not particularly a sacred day in Hindu tradition, and there is no day of Sabbath in Hinduism, in most of the temples in Western countries, Sundays have become the days when most people come to worship. This is due to secular reasons of convenience and scheduling of activities around school-age children's curricular and extracurricular needs.

Over the years, the temple has welcomed many visitors, both Hindu and non-Hindu. Of particular note are the students and faculty from various institutions of higher learning, as well as groups from the various metropolitan Atlanta and Georgia churches. Students come because of a class assignment, usually in their religion class, South Asian studies course, or interfaith/intercultural studies course. Churches come to understand other religions, many times as fieldwork for their interfaith seminars. Recently the temple was host to one of the meetings of the Metro Atlanta Interfaith Alliance. Often, speakers from the temple also visit churches and synagogues, by invitation, to talk about the Hindu faith and its traditions.

There are no restrictions that are specific to a non-Hindu. Everyone follows the same rules inside the temple. The temple priests are trained in the worship and service traditions of South India. They speak one or more of the South Indian languages. They do not have a very good command of English language. However, they do understand when someone speaks to them in English. In Hindu tradition, the temple priest is a functionary, rather than a minister or a pastor. They supervise and perform the temple rituals.



People visit the temple for *darshan*, that is, to see and be seen by God. The priest performs a *puja* (ritual during which offerings are made to God), generally emphasizing the glory of God and asking for forgiveness and blessings on behalf of the devotees. There is no sermon and there is no preaching. When a non-Hindu visits the temple, he or she will observe the *puja* and may be offered *prasad* (food or flowers offered to the deity and returned to worshippers as blessed) along with other devotees attend the worship service at that time. The priests are well aware that some people may not want to accept these offerings and they respect that decision. They are gradually learning to communicate in English and, as time goes on, they may be able to explain the meaning of the various rituals in English.

Given the intense interest in learning more about the temple and its traditions and practices, the executive committee and the education committee have decided to put together scheduled tours of the temple, when a trained volunteer will give a brief introduction and then take the

visitors on a guided tour. Materials are being prepared for this project and volunteer training will take place in the near future. In the beginning, scheduled tours will be offered twice a month. Depending on the response and the need, they may be offered on a weekly basis. This will not preclude a visitor coming to the temple during regular hours to observe the happenings and talk with worshippers and priests informally.

The Hindu Temple of Atlanta has been trying to be truthful to the requirements of a traditional South Indian temple, while mindful of the needs of a community that is in a Western society.