

Hindus flock to Flushing for Shivratri

Boro has oldest temple in U.S.

BY VINITA SINGLA

FLOWERS, FRUIT, clothes and jewelry — along with thousands of worshippers — flooded America's oldest Hindu temple last week to celebrate Shivratri.

The three-day festival at the Hindu Temple Society of North America in Flushing honored shiva, a deity revered as both the destroyer and re-producer of life.

"It's the most elaborate worship anywhere in the U.S. that you can find," said Nin Desai, who drove 2½ hours from Pennsylvania for the celebration.

It marked the 15th annual trip to Flushing for Desai, who wore a necklace made out of 108 rudraksha beads, which yogis believe are the teardrops of shiva.

Many of the faithful fasted on Shivratri, which begins on the 14th night in the Hindu calendar.

"I did take some water, which I'm not supposed to," admitted Desai.

Some believe Shivratri marks the anniversary of shiva's marriage to parvati, a Hindu goddess. Others say it was the night when shiva danced to honor primal creation, preservation and destruction. Yet others celebrate shiva's manifestation of himself into the form of the lingum, a black dome-shaped stone icon that represents eternal time.

In his human form, shiva, who has a third eye and a blue neck because he is believed to have swallowed poison to save mankind, is usually portrayed with snakes coiled around his neck, holding a trident.



Lakshmi Sundararaman makes garlands for Shivratri last week at the Hindu Temple Society of North America in Flushing.

At the temple, priests chanted "Om Namah Shivaya" and sang to honor Shiva while seated on the floor in front of the marble idols adorned with new saris and jewelry.

Two priests, wearing white dhotis, recited prayers. Men and women took turns leading verses of religious songs.

Lakshmi Sundararaman, wrapped in a purple and green sari embroidered with a gold pattern, worked with 14 other women to make gar-

lands out of pink carnations as offerings for shiva.

In each of the festival's phases, the lingum was adorned with gifts, including milk, water, yogurt, sugar and honey.

The garlands were offered to the lingum at 5:30 a.m. on March 6, in the final phase.

Sundararaman, who moved to Flushing from Madras in 1969, said she was tired but happy after spending 12 hours a day for three days working with other volunteers.

"The whole night, you're supposed to wake up and pray to God," she said.

Sujanir Varma prepared for Shivratri by buying some Indian sweets, milk and fruits, as well as offerings for parvati and shiva.

"I've had things in the past that have sort of worked out when I've prayed to Lord Shiva and that's why I come," said Varma, 31, a rehabilitation physician who has come to the temple since she was 6 years old.

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