Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam

In common usage, the word pīṭham is used much differently from the word “temple” or kōvil in Tamil. A temple may be the physical building in which worship takes place, but the pīṭham is the soul of the temple. It is the crux in which the life-force or prāṇā of the temple is focused. For that reason, Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam has been around much, much longer than the temple that stands at 6970/6980 East River Road in the town of Rush, NY today.

Sri Vidya
Temple Society

History of the Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam

1971

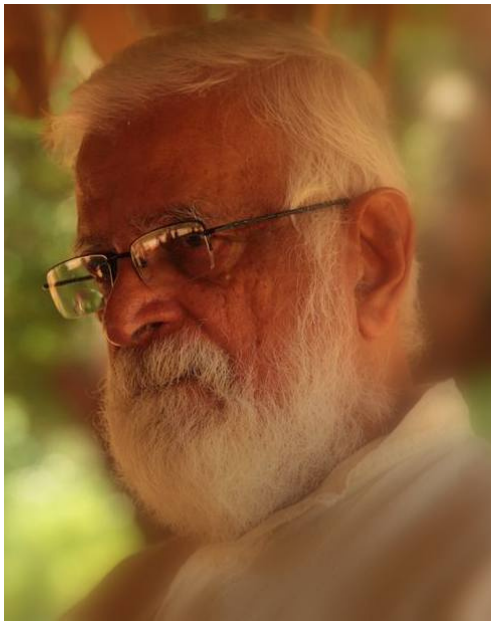
Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam was started by Navaratnam Wijayaharan, who is the pīṭhādhipati (head) of the temple today and is affectionately known as Haran Aiya. He and his wife Shakuntala (affectionately known as Amma) actually started the pīṭham in Zambia in 1971. It began in a two-bedroom apartment on Chilubi Road in the capital city of Lusaka, with regular pārāyaṇam of Lalitā Sahasranāmam and pūjā with the aṣṭōttara śata nāmāvali for Subrahmaṇyā.

1974

In 1974, a Śivakāmasundarī and Naṭarājā were obtained in Madras and brought to Lusaka. After the 1976 Sivarātri celebrations, regular Lalitā Sahasranāma pārāyaṇam started in Aiya's and Amma's apartment. Gradually, a group of devotees attracted by the pārāyaṇam joined in. These devotees were from a cross-section of the Indian sub-continent; India, Malaysia, Mauritius, Singapore and Sri Lanka. As the pārāyaṇam continued, the two-bedroom apartment became a hub for most of the devotees in Lusaka and pretty soon there was no room in the apartment during the pūjās. The shrine slowly began to grow.

1976

In 1976, a Śrīcakrā was brought from the Madurai Mīnākṣī temple, after receiving 45 days of pūjā . Soon after it was brought, the devotees added the Khaḍgamālā stōtram, popularly known as Sahasrākṣara vidyā, to their repertoire. All of this was going on without Aiya or Amma having formal initiation into Śrīvidyā, the secret tradition of Śakti worship. This changed in 1979 when the couple and their young daughter, Sarumati, met Śrī-la-Śrī Amṛtānandanātha sarasvatī (affectionately known as Guruji), who eventually became their guru.



Guruji was born Prahlad Shastri to a smārta brahmin telugu family. A nuclear physicist by profession, he left Indira Gandhi's India with his family after being asked to use his knowledge to develop nuclear arms. Finding this idea distasteful, Guruji obtained a teaching position at the University of Lusaka and moved his family to Zambia. Aiya was also working in Lusaka at the time for the Ministry of Power, Transport, and Works. Guruji and his wife were already Śrīvidyā upāsakās, obtaining mantra dīkṣā from Sri Svaprakāśānandanātha Tīrtha of Annakapalle, Andhra Pradesh.

After finding that Guruji was a Śrīvidyā upāsakā, Aiya asked him for mantra dīkṣā. Despite Guruji's orthodox upbringing in the priestly caste, he had none of the common prejudices against initiating Aiya and Amma, both non-Brahmins, into Śrīvidyā.

1979

During a marathon pūjā session in October 1979, Guruji initiated both Aiya and Amma into Śrīvidyā with 16 mantrās in one sitting. Guruji and Aiya were only in the same continent for a few months; Aiya and Amma soon moved to the United States and Guruji and his wife later moved back to India. While in the United States, Aiya, Amma, and Saru met many other students over the years and initiated countless people into the ancient tradition of Śrīvidyā.

Mid-1980s

They lived in various towns around upstate New York, and finally settled in Rochester in the mid-1980s. There, the Devi put them in contact with more like-minded people who wanted to learn pūjā s and chanting. Aiya openly taught them everything he knew, as he still does today.

Early 1990s

In the early 1990s, he received a call from the Sringeri Peetam in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. They had a Śrī Rājarājēśvarī mūrti that they could not take care of anymore. If they could not find a home for Her, they would have to submerge her into the Atlantic Ocean. Aiya told them to hold on; he wanted Her to be with him. He drove to Pennsylvania, picked up the Devi along with Gaṇapati and a beautiful Bāṇa liṅgam and soon installed them in his garage. These are the same mūrtis that sit in the temple's mūlasthānam today. The garage became every inch of a temple and grew exponentially.

Several pūjās and festivals, such as Navāvaraṇa pūjā s on Pūrṇima days, Śāradā Navarātri, Śivarātri, Guru Pūrṇima, Gaṇapati Caturti, and Skanda ṣaṣṭi to name a few, were conducted regularly on a grandeur scale. The energy within these deities soon began to attract large number of devotees from many parts of the USA, Canada, England and other parts of the world. In just a few years, they were encountering issues regarding crowds of devotees blocking residential neighbourhood. Hence, the City told Aiya he had to find another place for the temple.

1995

The present location of the temple was bought in September 1995; this land spans about 23 acres. While scouting properties for the temple's permanent location, there were several characteristics and criteria Aiya had in mind for the land. In accordance with the Śāstrās (ancient Hindu texts), a desirable site for a Śiva/Śakti temple is one where:

- Cows and horses have lived before—where the inner sanctum now stands was once cattle and horse stables
- The land begins to slope towards the Northeast (īśānya)
- There is a major local river, Genessee River, toward the West. Also, on the actual temple property is a small creek (commonly called Kāśi), which circumambulates the property
- There are several fruit trees
- There is an abundance of wildlife
- There is no indication that humans have lived on that ground before (i.e. human hair, clothing fibres, etc.)

By the Mother's grace, Aiya found the present property at 6970/6980 East River Road, Rush, NY.

1997

In May 1997, Pūjyaśrī Matiōḷi Sarasvatī amma, who is widely believed to be the earthly personification of Goddess Śrī Akhilāṇḍēśvarī of Jambukēśvaram, blessed the location by performing Bhūmi pūjā . Subsequently, Aiya built the temple, and installed Śrī Rājarājēśvarī Dēvī at main Sannidhi, Gaṇapati at Nirṛti corner and Śiva in Uttara corner in May 1998.

For two Guru Pūrṇima celebrations, Guruji Amṛtānandanātha Sarasvatī himself was present at the temple. Guruji performed Pūrṇābhiṣēkam to Caitanyānandanātha and jñānāmbā for the second time at the location where Dēvī mūrti is seated.

Recognizing his students needed their own little shrines, Aiya asked the Dēvī residing in his heart how these little temples in people's homes should be consecrated. She directed him that peetam seats for her should be established at various houses. True to the promise that Caitanyānandā gave to Guruji, Aiya continues to share the experiences and teachings with everyone that approached the pīṭham .

There are over 223 pīṭhams established all over the world, including in the U.S., Canada, France, Germany, Holland, England, South Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore, New Zealand and Australia. These pīṭhams are Śrīcakrā or Śrī Mērus (the 3D version of a Śrīcakrā) that have been consecrated at the main temple in Rush, New York and handed over to people to worship within their own homes.

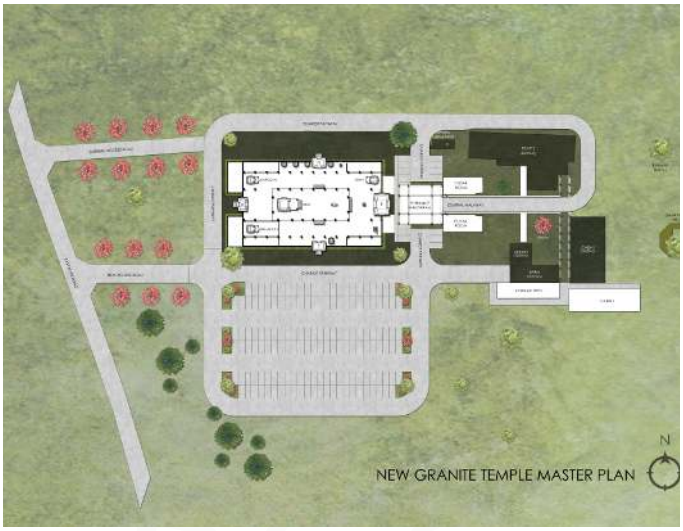
2003

By 2003, the temple was already growing once again. Hence, Aiya embarked on an expansion project that would build a roof over the main hōmakuṇḍam, which was outside at that time. In May 2003, Pūjyaśrī Mathioli Sarasvatī consecrated the yajña śālā (the area where the hōmakuṇḍam is located) and new kitchen.

2010

In 2010, Aiyā's disciples and the public at large turned out by the hundreds to lend a hand for the 11-day punaruddhāraṇa kumbābhiṣēkam, where everyone performed 11 Rudra hōmams a day, for 11 days, in each of 121 hōmakuṇḍams. It was the largest such event up until, and since that time.

2010 to Present



The planning for the Rajagopuram (New Granite) Temple is in full force. Many volunteers have been helping this vision come to light by contributing their expertise in areas like planning, architecture, design, construction, fundraising, and much more.

Throughout the Years

Everyone from small children to the elderly is encouraged to learn and take turns volunteering in various ways around the temple, from cutting vegetables to preparing pūjā trays to scrubbing the bathrooms. The temple runs solely on its volunteers' strength and has no paid employees, including Aiya and Amma.

Aiya has made sure that since its inception at its present location, Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam grows a little more each year. The temple grounds have seen the construction of a special Bhairavā shrine, a beautiful deck, gazebos hosting massive śivaliṅgams, and a multi-purpose auditorium-hall. The property is also home to a vast expanse of wetlands and untouched forestry.

On its website, www.srividya.org, the temple also publishes a quarterly online magazine, titled the 'Sri Chakra'. This was an initiative Aiya started on a manual printing press in 1989 but has since been taken over by his disciples and made digitally available. It is full of news and great articles, and is free to read and download. Also on the website are free learning materials, an online bookstore, and several galleries of pictures from festivals.

Another tradition Aiya has taught his students is that worship should be done for its own sake and not for profit or as a business. That is why the Sri Rajarajeswari Peetam does not charge for teaching people pūjā , monthly classes, or archanas. Any fees are merely to cover the cost of materials. In addition, the temple is a registered US 501(c)3 non-profit organization. To this day, the temple provides three meals and tea/snacks to all visitors for free, every day of the year.

The pīṭham also hosts monthly classes for parents and children on religious and cultural topics. Moreover, the Vibhuti Saivaite Immersion (VSI) program is a week-long children's overnight program conducted annually at the temple. This program has been running since 2004. Designed for children ages 10 to 19, the program has seen high enrolment every year of its operation, with more than 100 children present some years.

What makes Sri Vidya Temple unique?

The Sri Vidya Temple was consecrated as a "Śakti Pradhāna Śivālayam." The divine energies of both Śiva and Śakti are present, but the Śakti principle is predominant in the form of Divine Mother Rājarājēśvarī.

Universal Access

Inclusive wisdom

SVTS opens its doors to anyone who has made the commitment to learn the Vidyā, **regardless of gender, caste, creed and ethnicity.** Knowledge of sacred mantrās and rituals is widely shared with all who are interested in learning. **Our temple is one of the only temples that allows women to directly perform abhiṣēkam and pūjā to the deities.** Everyone is invited to join in and participate, in any capacity in which they are comfortable and interested.

Access to the Mother without intermediaries

At SVTS, everyone has direct access to the Mother at the garbha gṛham (sanctum). We believe that **all are equal children of the Mother** and that there is no need for a priest to act as an intermediary between her and yourself. As such, those who visit the temple can **freely touch her feet and perform abhiṣēkam** to her themselves.

Knowledge, learning and prasādam is always free

At SVTS, no one is required to pay for learning and prasādam. Those who are interested in performing archana are also given the chance to do so free of charge. Any funds collected through special sponsorships for services and donations are exclusively used to cover the cost for materials (fruits, flowers, etc) and for raw ingredients used for cooking.

Encouragement of Intellectual Curiosity & Learning

SVTS is a **"learning temple"** that strives to share divine knowledge with all who are interested in learning. The intricacies behind rituals are based in ancient understandings of science, which have been lost throughout generations, leading to a "just do it and don't ask questions" outlook. With a firm understanding and knowledge base on the scientific evidence behind ritual worship, the temple aims to **encourage intellectual curiosity amongst visitors and demystify the purpose and significance of rituals.** The **"why" and "how" are emphasized every day, in every pūjā.** In addition, they are beautifully enunciated via educational materials published by the temple and presented at workshops.

Visitors are encouraged to ask questions at every class, workshop, or ritual at the temple. Questions as simple as "Why do we perform abhiṣēkam to these idols?" or "Why are women discouraged from visiting temples during their monthly cycle?" are widely welcomed along with advanced questions about the impact of specific mantrās and practices.

Youth Engagement & Empowerment

We believe it is our sacred duty to educate and empower the next generation of youth, so that our great Sanātana Dharma will continue to flourish for millennia. In our Temple, you'll often see **youth of every age taking an active role in preparing for festivals, cooking, chanting mantrās, and even performing some of the pūjās**. Through classes, workshops and summer youth camps, the SVTS aims to pass on knowledge about spiritual principles behind our sacred traditions to future generations.

SVTS strives to provide opportunities for youth to experience the nuances behind tradition and worship by teaching, sharing, performing rituals, and running various functions of the temple. A taste of one's own divine nature is often all it takes to commit one to a life of self-discovery and service for the divine.

Some specific ways in which youth are involved include:

- Organizing and running temple festivals
- Performing daily pūjās at the temple
- Temple construction, maintenance, and various temple projects
- Organizing the annual Vibhuti Saivaite Immersion (VSI) summer program, Youth Learning Sessions (YLS) for youth aged 13-25, Bala Vidya (BV) for children aged 5-12 and other learning activities
- Photography, media coverage and social media
- Artwork creation and development of the monthly Sri Chakra Journal

Conservation of Cultural Traditions

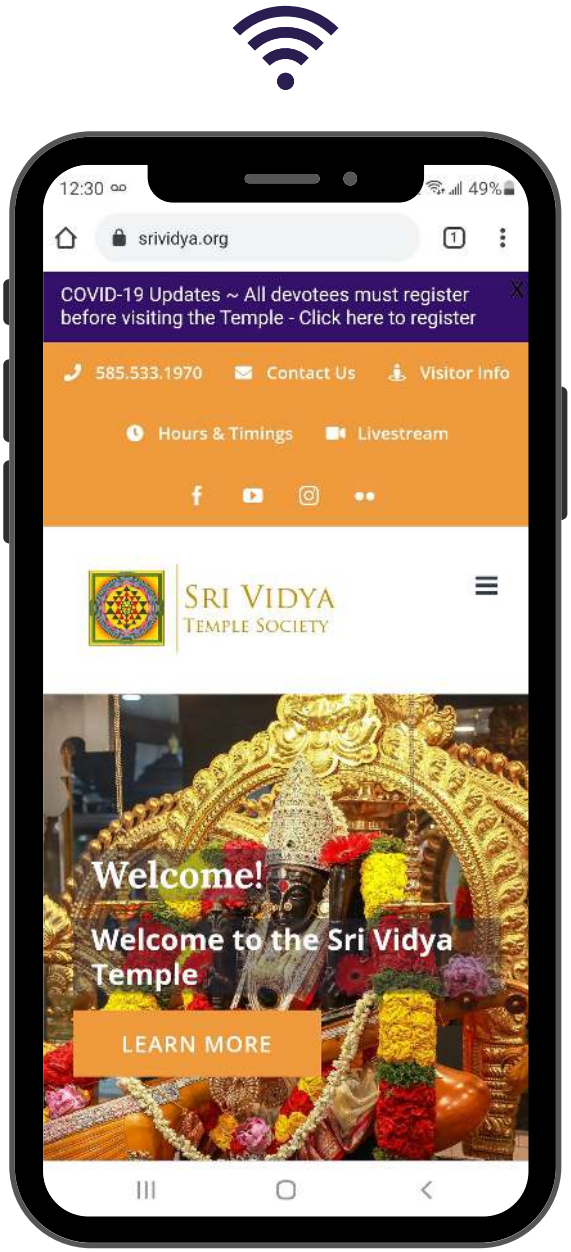
SVTS strives to actively preserve and encourage others to participate in South Indian temple traditions that are slowly fading away. Some of our activities include:

- **Traditional temple music**, including the use of instruments such as the Nādaswaram
- **Traditional temple festivals, and alaṅkāram** (dressing and decoration of the deity)
- **Traditional arts and crafts** (Ex: kōlam (raṅgōli), kalaśam stringing, & tōraṇam making)
- The **integration of classical and folk music and dance** into temple festivals
- The **singing of ancient Tamil Śaivaite poetic works** into pūjās

Completely Volunteer-Run

SVTS has **no paid employees and is completely volunteer-run.** The priests are also volunteers who have been initiated into and have learned the necessary rituals to perform pūjās. Those mowing the lawns, preparing food in the kitchen, and repairing broken fixtures in the temple are all volunteers, who are doing their work as their sādhana and out of love for the Mother and her children.

Connect with SVTS



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