

HINDUISM



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London's Hindu Temples



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TRADITION

London: A Sri Lankan Citadel of Saivism

The Tamil Hindus' dedication for their beloved Lord Murugan has made London the largest bastion of Saivite Hinduism in the Western world

BY RAMAI AND VATSHALAN
SANTHIRAPALA, LONDON

LONDON IS FAMED FOR ITS RICH culture, racial diversity and regal history, recently capturing the attention of *Forbes* magazine, which deemed it the world's most influential city. Inside this cosmopolitan metropolis an untold Hindu story of equal fascination emerges. In this article, we chronicle the immigration of Saivite Hinduism to London from Sri Lanka's Jaffna Peninsula, the journey from one island in the Indian Ocean to another 5,000 miles away. An estimated 300,000 Tamils reside in the UK, the densest concentration in the Western world, the majority of them within London itself. Most have immigrated from Sri Lanka; a minority hail from India, Malaysia, South Africa, Mauritius and Singapore. This homogenous concentration has provided a unique community enabling Saivism to flourish and remain true to its orthodox principles. London is today home to at least



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23 Saivite temples, all founded by Sri Lankan Tamils in the last 40 years, many hidden inside unassuming English exteriors. Through these holy structures, the rich power of the Tamil faith flows out, making London the West's most prominent Saivite bastion.

The History of Tamil Immigrations

Historically Tamils in Sri Lanka remained staunch adherents of Saiva Siddhanta as revealed in the holy texts of the Vedas and Saiva Agamas, despite centuries of oppressive colonization by Portuguese and British rulers. The search for professional opportunities in the 1960s inspired the first wave of Sri Lankan migrations. A second wave began in the early 80s, as the civil war drove thousands of refugees from their lush, tropical homeland.

By unforeseen providence, the existence of all these temples—and many elsewhere in the diaspora—is largely due to the traumatic flight of refugees. They stoically endured all challenges in their new homelands to perpetuate the rich culture of Saivism for their generation and beyond. There was also a driving spiritual power from inner realms—Lord Murugan, Skanda. In many respects this is His story—one that London's temple elders have wanted to share for decades.



The Pioneer of Saivism in Europe

Among the many great souls who generously contributed their time, finances and love to propagating Jaffna's religion in London and throughout Europe, Sri Somasundaram Sabapathipillai stands out as the preeminent pioneer. He came to the British capitol with a singular mission—to ensure that his faith would survive the 5,000-mile journey west. Born December 27, 1910, in Point Pedro, Jaffna, he completed his masters in London and returned to Sri Lanka to practice law. In 1939 he married Maheswary, daughter of Sri and Smt. Mailvaganam. The great sage Siva Yogaswami (1872-1964) of Nallur, Jaffna, paid an unheralded visit to the newlyweds and told Sabapathipillai, "You have the blessings of Lord Murugan now that you are marrying the daughter of Mailvaganam." That auspicious blessing may explain the impact the young attorney was to make in Europe.

Even in married life, he pursued austerities and pilgrimages. Ultimately he relinquished his legal career to concentrate on his spiritual destiny and received the triple Saiva initiations from Sri Eesana Sivachariar, principal of the Saiva Siddhanta College in Palani, India. From that moment onwards, he performed daily Siva puja and supported temples beloved by Lord Murugan—Kataragama, Nallur and Keerimalai in Sri Lanka and Thiruchendur in South India. He was a prime mover in bringing together all Hindu institutions in Sri Lanka to form the still-influential

All Ceylon Hindu Congress. In 1965, at age 55, Sabapathipillai moved to London. Shortly after arriving, he was invited by the Ceylon High Commission to conduct puja to Lord Murugan at the embassy in Hyde Park on February 4, Sri Lanka's Independence Day.

Hindu Association of Great Britain

Before long, he quickly recognized the need for an umbrella organization for London's

London with festivities: (Clockwise from above left) Flag raising at the Highgate Hill Murugan temple; women carry milk to be offered to the Goddess; dressed as the child saint Thirugnanasambandar, Pranav Sarma is the son of Shri Shridhar; portrait of Sri Somasundaram Sabapathipillai

Tamils, who were practicing their religion throughout the city in small isolated groups. He invited Tamils originating from Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, Singapore and South Africa to meet and commune as one. The first meeting of the Hindu Association of Great Britain—the first Saivite association in Europe—was held on Navaratri, October 23, 1966, with the resolve to "foster Saiva Siddhanta locally and then globally." A constitution was drafted and ardent devotees were encouraged to take positions in the organization.

Thiruchendur Murugan Arrives

It was clear that the community needed a temple in order to promote Saiva Siddhanta and conduct pujas on a regular basis. But no appeal for funds would be made until there was sufficient demand and assurance that institutions could be properly maintained. To cultivate community support, devotees offered their homes for weekly puja and for festival celebrations, mostly importantly Mahasivaratri, which many observed every



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COURTESY OF SHREE GHANA PATHY TEMPLE



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Humble exteriors, magnificent

interiors: (left top) Europe's first consecrated Hindu temple, the Wimbledon Ghanapathy Temple still sports the exterior of the Presbyterian church that it once was; (left middle) Inside is a different story. At great sacrifice and after many years of work, traditional sanctums were built and the Mahakumbhabhishekam was held in January of 2015, thirty-four years after it was founded, in 1981.

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year in the Wimbledon home of Mr. and Mrs. Ratnasingham. As attendance in homes increased, gatherings were shifted to public halls.

In the early 70s, devotees concluded they had outgrown the use of pictures and small statues in the rituals. The time had come to acquire from India a proper image of the Deity, cast in the traditional five metals—*panchaloka*. This desire was realized in 1973 when the murti of Thiruchendur Murugan arrived. He was commissioned by Sri Sabapathipillai, who received Him in Chennai and carried Him on a flight back to London. The radiantly smiling Deity brought great joy to the Tamils.

Upon His arrival, Murugan was placed in the Bharat Sevashram Sangha at Shephard Bush, West London, a fitting first landing for the Lord of Renunciates, as the BSS monks are known for their high standards of monasticism. Skanda Shashti, a major festival day to the God, had special significance in London that year. Devotees witnessed the *prana prathistha* (life-infusing) ceremony for the murti. An elaborate homa infused Lord Murugan from the inner worlds to infuse the murti with His Divine Grace, and the first abhishekam and puja were performed. This was a wonderful and poignant day for London's Tamils: the Lord of their hearts had arrived. Shouts of "Vetri Vel Muruganukku! Haro Hara!" reverberated through the hall.

The Traveling Lord

Following His consecration, Thiruchendur Murugan traveled throughout the City and beyond, staying at the home of Sabapathipillai and others during the week. On weekends and festival days He was taken to large public venues so that His many devotees could see Him and experience His darshan. C. Krishnamoorthy, retired engineer, project manager and past president of the Hindus Association of Great Britain, said, "When Murugan first came, we didn't have any temples. We only had the Friday evening pujas at Wimbledon Kenneth Black Memorial Hall. We thought to make Him available to all Hindus living in UK, and everyone was keen to arrange pujas. He traveled all over England, and huge crowds came wherever this beautiful statue went. I think He had a grand time." This unusual pattern was followed for 25 years.

Lord Murugan also traveled beyond the borders of London to Skanda Vale, a multi-faith ashram

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Old structures transformed: (left bottom) The London Sivan Kovil in Lewisham resides in a former warehouse, beautifully remodeled inside and out

in Wales (which now enjoys three temples and 90,000 pilgrims annually); to Edinburgh, Scotland; and to Birmingham, where a grand puja was attended by Tamil, Telegu, Punjabi and Gujarati devotees. Today most of the places He visited have a vibrant and strong temple culture, a tribute to the immense sakti, spiritual power, that emanates from Him.

The increasing numbers and fervor of Murugan's devotees fed the desire to build Him a temple. In 1974 an offshoot of the Hindu Association of Great Britain was formed—a financial instrument, the Britannia Hindu (Saiva) Temple Trust, whose sole aim was to raise funds to build a temple. The devotees' hard work and perseverance paid off. A site at 200A Archway Road in North London was purchased in 1977, which would one day become the Highgate Hill Murugan Temple. In 1979, Thiruchendur Murugan was installed at this site, but without full consecration rites. As it turned out, this was not to be His permanent residence.

Europe's First Hindu Temple

The Hindu Association of Great Britain encountered many obstacles in their attempts to establish a consecrated temple. Manickavasagar Srikantha explained, "There was even a parliamentary debate on whether a Hindu



COURTESY OF SHREE GHANAPATHY TEMPLE

place of worship could be established in the UK. One of the MPs raised objections to allowing 'pagan worship' and concerns about milk baths clogging the city drainage system. We presented the case that our worship was prescribed by our scriptures, the *Saiva Agamas*. Eventually, we prevailed and a bill was passed to allow a Hindu temple to be built." Clearly, Lord Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles, had to arrive in the capitol in order to clear the way for this and other temples.

In 1978 Mr. Ratnasingham, a founding member of the Association, was entrusted with the divine task of bringing a panchaloka murti of Lord Ganesha from India. Two years

In service of the Deity: (left) Four priests of the Shree Ghanapathy Temple

later, the community purchased the Wimbledon Churchill Halls, in a leafy south suburb, from Sir Cyril Black, a former Member of Parliament. Devotees converted the former Presbyterian church into a Ganesha temple. By September of 1981, the Shree Ghanapathy Temple was inaugurated with the celebration of its Mahakumbhabhishekam (consecration ceremony). This was Europe's first fully sanctified temple. Lord Ganesha had found a permanent home. This temple has become a conduit for Hindu education and cultural activities. The Inner London Educational Authority has recommended it as the best place to learn about Hinduism and temple worship. Several thousand public school children now visit every year and hundreds of children attend classes at the adjacent Sai Baba center. The vision and success of the temple is attributed to the grace of Lord Ganesha working through Mr. Ratnasingham, who departed this Earth plane in 1998.

Homes in North & South London

Meanwhile, weekly pujas to Lord Murugan continued in the mid-80s at the Wimbledon Hall in South London using small murtis, but attendance diminished following the installation of the panchaloka murti at Highgate

Lord Murugan: The First Guru

From antiquity, Lord Murugan's energy has reverberated within the hearts of South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils. South India is home to six of His most holy abodes (the Arupadai Veedu pilgrimage), and Sri Lanka boasts the world-famous shrines of Nallur, Maviddapuram and Kataragama, the latter of which attracts significant devotion from Hindus and Buddhists alike. Murugan is also known throughout India as Kumara or Skanda.

Ancient Tamil history is intrinsically linked to Lord Murugan. At the Adichanallur archaeological site in Thirunelveli, South India, where evidence of civilization dates back 3,800 years or more, excavations have unearthed relics of an iron Vel with rooster—both symbols associated with Lord Murugan—thought to date from a proto-Tamilian race many thousands of years ago.

The first image of Murugan crafted for London was a 32-inch-tall, five-metal replica of the Senthil Andavar Deity enshrined at the famed seaside temple of Thiruchendur in South India. The exquisite smiling face of Murugan (right) became the driving force behind the spread of Saivism in the UK. Known in Britain as Thiruchendur Murugan, He now resides in a shrine at the Stoneleigh Rajarajeswari Temple.



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Hill in North London, fifteen miles away. Cross-town transportation is painfully slow; and with an influx of Tamils from the recently declared war zone of Jaffna, there was an urgency to amplify pujas for Lord Murugan in South London.

After evaluating the devotees' needs, the Hindu Association of Great Britain resolved that Thiruchendur Murugan should return to South London. In compensation, the devotees of Highgate Hill obtained a new murti of Murugan in the form of Arumugam (the Six-Faced One) with His consorts Valli and Devayani. Construction at Highgate Hill continued, and in 1986 London's second fully consecrated Hindu temple was established.

The Thiruchendur Murugan murti remained without a permanent home. Sri Sabapathipillai departed this world in 1989 with a tinge of sadness that he had not found a place for His Lord. But that was taken care of before too many more years. Another temple, this one for the Mother Goddess, Sri Rajarajeswary Amman, was being built at the Surrey suburb of Stoneleigh. Thiruchendur Murugan finally took up permanent residence in a side shrine in this temple, which celebrated its Mahakumbhabhishekam in 1999. He becomes the center of worship on His monthly day of Karthigai and during His annual festivals of Tai Pusam, Skanda Shashti, Thirukarthigai (Karthigai Deepam) and Vaisakasi Vishakam.

Expansion to Contemporary Times

With both Lord Ganesha and Lord Murugan properly installed in London, the two temples provided comfort, solace and hope to Tamils fleeing Sri Lanka's civil war. Though Great Britain felt very different from the homeland, the refugees' culture of temple



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worship, the bedrock of their lives, was still available.

As the Tamil Saivite population increased, and their priests found it easier to travel between nations, the number of temples increased rapidly. Mrs. Shymala Srikantha, a devotee of the Highgate Murugan Temple relates, "Priests whose contracts ended always found a way to stay here. They all branched out and created more temples. First Murugan, then Amman, then Sivan. But they all are thankful to Lord Murugan, from

Whom all these temples have come." Now, thirty years later, most London devotees find themselves within a thirty-minute drive of a spiritual home emanating the traditions of Jaffna. Nearly every Hindu here can take a short ride on the tube (British for subway) to catch the morning arati before going to work.

Along with the rise of temples has come an increase in the complexity and frequency of pujas. Tamil festivals such as Thai Pongal, Thai Pusam, Mahasivarathri, Tamil New Year, Ganesha Chathurthi, Skanda Shashti, Navaratri, Thirukarthigai and Thiruvembai are glorious celebrations in each and every temple. The core focus is to perform them concurrently with the traditional celebrations in Jaffna. The link to the motherland is ever present and never forgotten. It is the power of the homeland that is believed to sustain such a rich culture. While London cannot rival the fullness of Saivite culture practiced for thousands of years in India and Jaffna, it has come a long way toward replicating the essential religious lifestyle for Tamils who now call this city their home away from home.

The annual chariot festivals are a re-energizing time of intense daily worship, usually lasting ten days. Beautifully decorated regal chariots are paraded around the city streets. The processional Deity is brought forth to circumambulate His or Her temple and bless the community. The months of May to August are a gala time, as there is at least one



Precise rites and deep devotion: (clockwise from far left); In Highgate Hill, Lord Murugan is pulled on His chariot through the streets; children attend classes for religion and cultural arts at the Sai Center adjacent to the Wimbledon Ganesha temple; all festivals are replete with nadaswaram (temple horns) and taval (drums)

chariot festival every weekend with drums and temple horns resounding through the streets.

Complex rituals with homas, Vedic chanting and elegant abhishekams occur frequently. Major festivals are supported by close connections with Jaffna and Tamil Nadu, and Sivacharyas are often flown to London to join the resident priests, exponentially increasing the effervescent darshan that emanates from these powerful pujas.

Supporting the opulent temple culture are Tamil cultural organizations and private tutors teaching the arts of Bharatanatyam, Carnatic vocal, Tamil language and expertise in traditional instruments, such as vina and mridangam. This cultural development infuses temple festivals with music and dance. For the more cerebral, Saivite conferences have been established to preserve the great heritage among adults and youth. The Federation of Saiva Temples, UK, held its 16th Saiva Conference in April.

This success story is due in part to Britain's

sophisticated culture, which has openly welcomed Tamil traditions and understood the innate need for Hindu temples thousands of miles away from ancestral homes. Though often condemned for its colonial expansionism and wars, Britain has notably upheld social values of refinement, meritocracy, pluralism and religious tolerance, providing a fertile environment in which Saivism has flourished.

The Future

The tireless work of founding temple trustees will need to be continued in the decades to come if the rich Saiva culture is to be maintained and grow. The Shree Ghanapathy Temple and Highgate Hill Murugan Temple have begun incorporating the next generation into temple management committees and allowing a few committed souls to gain experience and understand expectations for the future. But many of the current generation are confused about their identity. As succession planning has begun in some of the major temples, there is a ripple of unease that the heirs of these institutions have yet to be found.

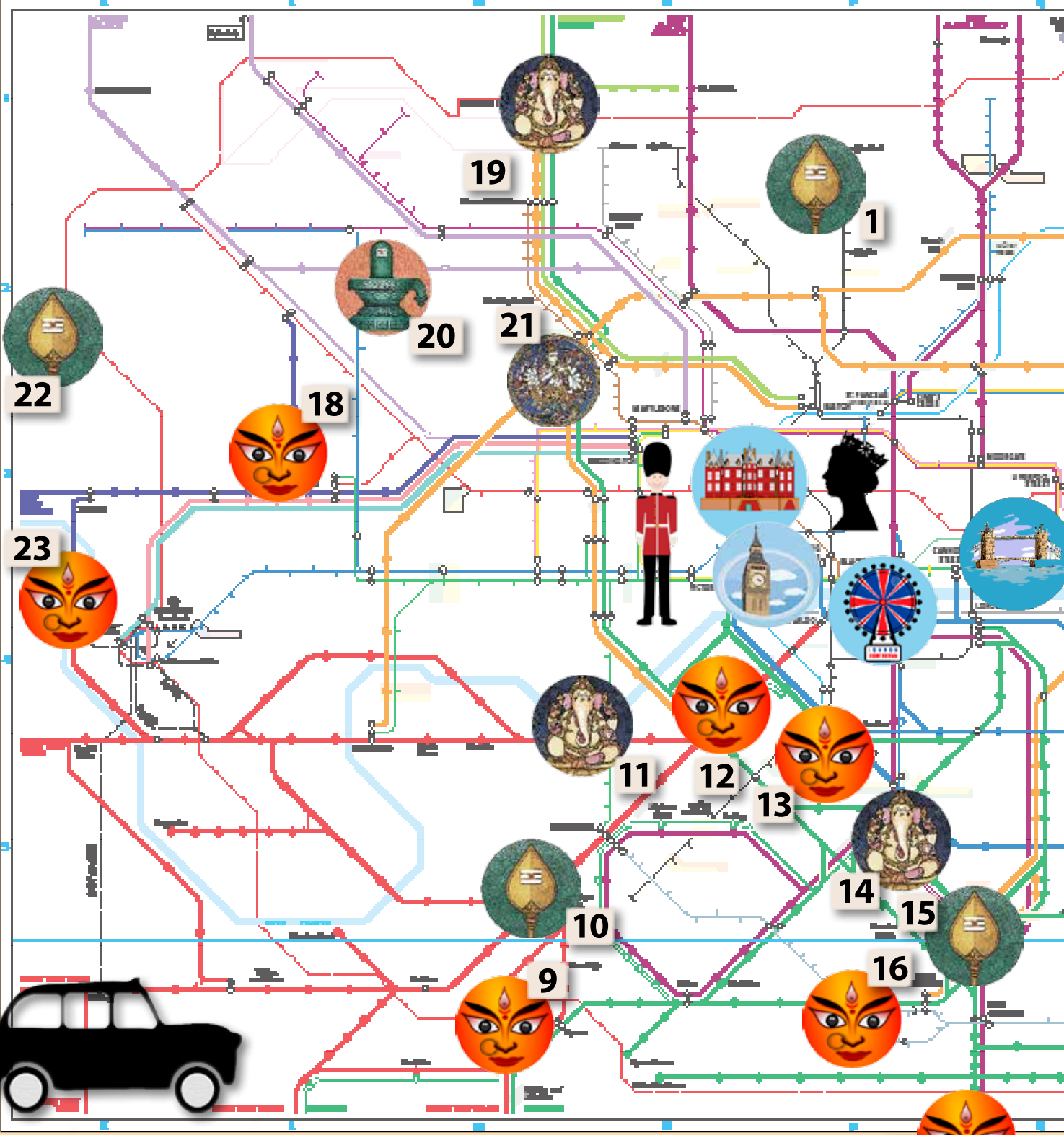
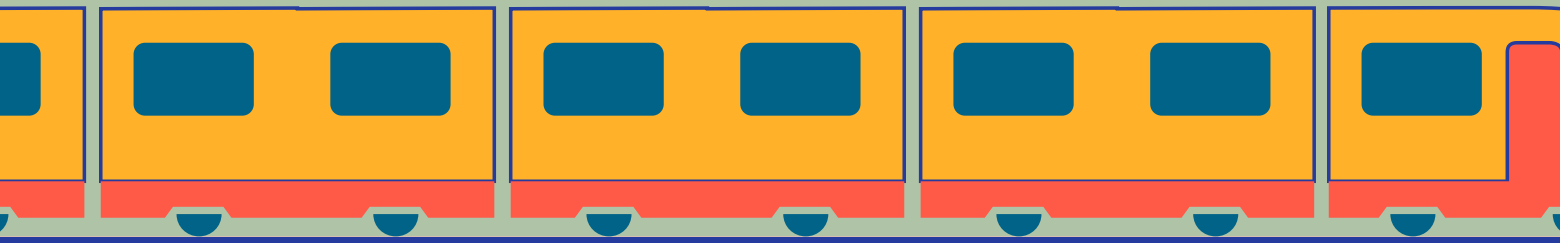
Balancing East and West is not easy. Parents want their children to secure professional and financial status, and spirituality and religion are often set aside to be explored in later years. This strategy relies on the next generation holding onto links with Jaffna—a region that is not their birthplace and which

perhaps they never visited. Some youth feel disconnected and do not see Jaffna's relevance to their lives today in this fast-paced Western city. Others have devoted their lives to promulgating the traditions of their parental homeland. Many want to understand their religion but have not found expressions that have meaning to them, nor a way to learn about their spiritual origins at their own pace. Stories of the Gods and life in Jaffna appear abstract, and a clear relevance to their everyday lives needs to be established. There is an urgent need for relevant religious education.

Our Personal Reflections

Next year's fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Hindu Association of Great Britain will provide an opportunity to reflect on the historical growth of Saivism in the UK—a story that will continue to emerge with time.

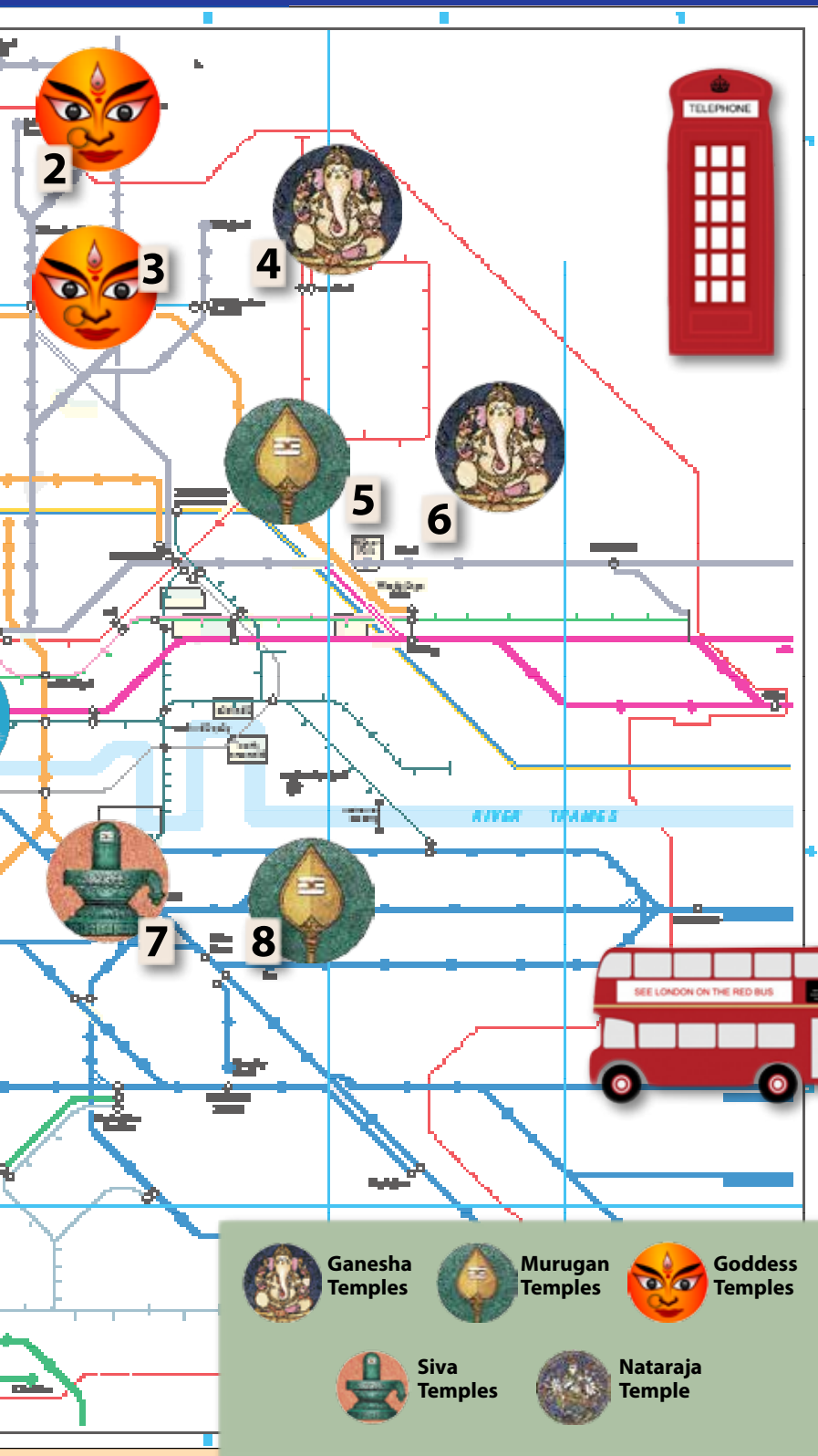
We, the brother-sister writers of this article, are filled with gratitude for our forefathers, who spread Saivism throughout Europe; for our temples whose darshan fills our lives; for our dedicated Saivite grandfather and our beloved ever-present guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami of the holy Kailasa Parampara and his successor, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, who keep the essence of Jaffna Saiva culture alive for us. Our hearts say thank you to Thiruchendur Murugan, the divine being who is bridging Saivism from Jaffna to London.





Visit London's Temples by Tube

Surrounding the City's Famed Historic Sites Are 23 Temples to Siva, Ganesha, Murugan and Amman



Temples are listed with their building status, festival attendance, average Friday evening attendance and opening date where known.

1. Highgatehill Murugan Temple, synagogue; 5,000; 200, 1986
2. Enfield Nagapooshani Amman Temple; hall, 20,000; 500; 2002
3. Sri Merupuram Mahabhadrakali Amman Devasthanam
4. Sri Katpaga Vinayagar Temple; hall; 2,000; 100; 2002
5. London Sri Murugan Temple; public house; 5,000; 250
6. London Sri Selva Vinayagar Temple
7. London Sivan Kovil; warehouse; 600; 100; 1999
8. Mankalopathy Sri Vel Murugan Temple
9. Sri Raja Rajeswari Amman Temple; church; 3,000; 80; 1999
10. Sri Thiruthanigai Vel Murugan; 500; 50
11. Shree Ghanapathy Temple; church; 8,000; 200; 1981—Europe's first fully consecrated Hindu temple
12. Sri Muthumari Amman Temple
13. London Sri Meenakshi Sunthareswarar Temple
14. Shree Sakthy Ghanapathy Temple; automobile workshop; 300; 40; 2001
15. Sivaskanthagiri Arulmigu Murugan Temple; hall; 200; 50; 2001
16. London Muthumari Amman Temple
17. Sri Swarna Kamadchy Amman Temple; factory building; 1,000; 75; 2008; Crawley, between London and Brighton
18. Shri Kanaga Thurkkai Amman; church; 2,000; 250; 1993
19. Shri Sithi Vinayagar Thevasthanam; warehouse; 2,500; 150
20. Eela Patheeswarar Temple; hall; 500; 300; 1999
21. London Nataraja Temple; hall; 100; 25; 2006
22. Uchi Murugan Kovil, High Wycombe, between London and Oxford
23. Shri Meenakshi Amman Temple, High Wycombe; hall; 100; 40; 2013

This list is drawn from interviews, Tamil directories and search engines. There may be more Saivite temples not shown here. For a list of 41 UK temples, including Vaishnava and Smarta, with addresses and details, see: bit.ly/1JoJuc

Voices—London Movers and Shakers

Sri Sivagamaratnam Kamalanatha

Kurukkal, Chief Sivacharya, Enfield Nagapooshani Ambaal Temple, BA (Hons) Hindu Civilization and Culture, Jaffna University: "Saiva religion is the world's foremost religion and the oldest, starting aeons ago. Lord Siva is its Supreme Lord. From our rich scriptures—the *Vedas*, *Saiva Agamas*, *Upa-nishads*, *Thevarams*, *Thiruvagasam*—we derive the principles of Saiva Siddhanta. Reflecting on Saivism's expansion to other countries, London is unique as it has so many Saivite temples. The affirmation of the *Skanda Puranam*, "May the greatness and truth of Saiva Siddhanta be spread throughout the whole world," has manifested here. Saiva Siddhanta arrived like



a unique jewel which has been staunchly protected with pride. The foundation of Saivism is to understand yourself and be loving towards others. "Praise be to Siva, Lord of people from foreign lands, who is also Supreme God of my own country," is the key concept of our texts, for we believe Lord Siva is the Father of all. Through the construction of temples, we have been able to teach the next generation our customs and religion. Just as a cow's body is full of milk, but only accessible from its udder, so, too, the Universal Lord is accessible with the help of temples and their Deities. Due to the daily prayers and ceremonies, the temple emanates God's power. Hence, to purify our soul it is important to attend the temple. Our London temples all conduct pujas as per the principles of our Agamic scriptures."

Chelliah Krishnamoorthy, 79, founding member of the Hindu Association of Great Britain, and Highgate Hill Murugan Temple trustee: "We are worried about what

happens when we go. Is the next generation going to take over these temples? Will there be money to pay the priest to do the pujas? Sri Lankans need to think about this.



Frequently elders or certain individuals don't allow others to get involved because they want to be in the forefront. But if we don't allow others to be involved, who will carry on? I also want to add that Sabapathipillai, who brought Thi-

ruchendur Murugan to London, was a highly evolved soul, a great man and for his great sacrifices, we are forever grateful."

Appathurai Vairavamoothy, 81, founding member of the Hindu Association of Great Britain, Treasurer, Highgate Hill Murugan Temple: "My job is to see that

Devotees talk about religious life and their participation in temple activities

Krishna Ragunathan, 42, business director, trustee, Sri Rajarajeswari Amman: "I was born in 1972 and went to a Catholic school and got influenced. My dad was very worried and started telling me about Hinduism, Pillaiyar, Murugan and Krishna. He made a big effort with us. We were lucky that the Ganesha temple is built right behind my house. So, suddenly Pillaiyar came into our lives. We grew up in the temple, going there so many times. My mom and dad were mad, mad, mad Murugan devotees. And the Thiruchendur Murugan that ended up at the



Amman temple was a big connection for our family. My mom and dad still go every year for Kandashasti at Thiruchendur in India. They are the big driving forces for me. To encourage young people, we need to be less

critical of things like their pronunciation of Tamil songs and let them sing, carry the Deity, encourage them to take the lead role. Slowly, they will be less shy, like I was, and start getting more involved."

Dr. Kirrija Prabakaran, mother of two: "Worship is very important. It helps us de-stress, beautify our mind and strengthen our positive feelings. As a professional, I

see those from cultures where prayer is not important struggle a lot with depression and other mental illnesses. I feel better when I go to temple, hearing these Thevarams, the bells ringing, the abhishekam and the puja. When I come home, my mind is charged. I have more energy to run daily things for the next



few days. That's helpful. Then it flattens until the next temple visit."

Vasee Nadesan Prasad, 33, banker, Shree Ghanapathy Temple Committee member: "My parents came to this country in the late 1970s. My mum jokes that during the festival in the 1981 I was in her stomach and heard Ganesha's bell ring and that's what's brought me here consistently. It all started with my parents. My roles include festival organization, liaising with the local police, the local community and liaising with the priests closely on organization inside the temple to ensure the festival runs smoothly. I generally work to bring new ideas, develop the festivals, develop the temple in some way and try to be a link with the younger generation. There is a second generation of devotees coming to this temple. We offer the same opportunity

that the generation above gave me, and making sure that continues down the line. A case in point: a set of boys, nicknamed 'Ganesha's boys,' help out during the annual festival, whether it be setting up, carrying Ganesha around the temple, being here early to prepare or cleaning up outside. It's amazing during the festivals. Even if they have to study for exams, they all find the time to come here and do what they can, even if only for an hour to help and leave. And it's a constant changing mix. They come and go. But this opportunity is always available to



them to come and help. It's something that has grown and grown. I think the development of the temple has been on that basis, and that's what's driven us forward. It's hard, but it's amazing, because I think if you put 108 percent into what you do at the temple, if you surrender to Him, you just give everything to Him, then everything else just falls in place. You don't know or realize it at the time, but it does."

Banuja Srikantha, 20, student: "My dad has been at this Highgate temple since it was built. We have literally grown up in the temple. The more I come, the more I grow. I



there are enough funds to run at least for the coming three months. Our revenues don't meet expenditures. The temple is not run on a commercial basis. We are subsidized by rentals on properties the temple owns and by voluntary

contributions. We try our best not to force people to pay for temple services. We offer *annadanam* (free food) almost daily. Anyone, whether they attend the temple or not, can walk off the street, eat and go. One issue with our temples is that we're all laymen. The priests are paid people and they have other jobs like any other workmen. And there is no spiritual leader as such. That is one of the things lacking in all our temples. Everyone follows the rituals, but they are not necessarily very spiritual. Unlike privately owned temples, like those of Ramakrishna Mission, which are very peaceful, there is a certain unrest here because of internal

disputes and arguments. On the positive side, we have 3,000 members. It's not a one man show. Everybody feels that the temple is theirs. At the end of the day, they know everybody is working for the temple. The temple will never fail."

Geetha Maheshwaran, 50, school teacher, daughter of the late Ratnasingham, a prime mover in the early London Saiva community: "My father founded the Shree Ghanapathy Temple. We held Sivaratri each year at our house for about 20 years, because we had one of the bigger houses. One of my earliest memories is enjoying Sivaratri with ladies downstairs doing prayers, men on the second floor and the kids playing upstairs. We loved that we could stay up all night. We didn't know much about the actual festival, but it was the beginning of the community coming together. Dad was deeply involved with the Britannia Hindu Shiva Temple Trust. But there was a lot of politics. It took so long, and my father felt a temple was urgently needed. God guided him. He and my mum re-mortgaged their house, and bought the Wimbledon property in the summer of 1980. He really wanted to

make sure the next generation was involved. He got us all to come here during the holidays. And within a year we built this temple. Of course, there were official contractors who got all of the walls done. But we came every day. We learned how to mix cement at the right ratios and put up plasterboard. So for us, our sweat is the very foundation



of this. My father did that with every single thing that we did. With every building that we did, every new building part, he got the kids involved in it. So they really felt that this was their temple. He was a karma yogi, not attached to position, could not sit still, was always working, had that soul for service, very charming and grounded. He would sit and chat with everyone. If we had crazy ideas, he would listen and say, 'Yes, fine, go and do it.' His passing was traumatic for us. But there was no question. We will carry on the work."

love coming here to find that inner peace, mental relief. It's a spiritual journey as well, because I want to find out the purpose of life and all of that here. I try to come here every time I come down from university. I do have a little shrine in Uni where I just pray. And I've also started to recently meditate. I don't



know how the two go together, but it's really, really good. Some children don't come to the temple because things have happened to them which has made them lose that. A lot of people my age don't actually believe in God. I also have friends who come to

the temple for the wrong reasons. They are being forced to come to the temple, and I don't think that's right. You should come to the temple because you want to come to the temple, not because your mom or your dad are forcing you to go. It has a lot to do with how the religion is implanted in them."

Aschani Thayaparan, 16, student: "My family is very religious, so that keeps me connected. Home is hectic, but in the temple I can leave everything behind and talk to God about my worries and problems and hope for His guidance. Only about 40 percent of my Tamil Hindu friends go to the



temple. For the others, homework, exams and especially the Internet have become a distraction. They also don't know why they should go. They feel they have no reason to go. We need education on the meaning behind the

temple. What's going on during puja? Why spend so much money on milk for bathing the Deity, when you could give it to charity? That's what I want to know. It does not make sense to me that you can ask God for something and He will give it to you. Getting these sorts of answers would definitely encourage people to go to the temple."

Neara Prabaharam, 13, student: "I have a lot of extracurricular activities, such as vocal, violin, dance and rowing. I go to temple at least once a week. But mainly I pray at home, because there you don't get distracted as much. It's just you and God. I feel that's stronger. When I wake up, I normally do a morning prayer asking for my day to go well. I go to temple once a week, and to the festivals. I like seeing God all dressed up; it feels like God is more awake. Balancing school and spiritual life is important, because I don't want to lose my spiritual life completely. Sometimes it's quite difficult. But I

still really want to stay connected with God. If you want help from God, you can't expect Him to help you when you lead life without Him knowing that you are committed to Him. That's why you've got to keep it up. My school day can be very tight. Connecting with God is my way of keeping on top of everything, and not falling and cracking under pressure."

Tulasi Ravindran, 20, avid volunteer at the Sri Raja Rajeswari Amman Temple: "I have been coming here since I was a baby, so this is a way of life. On a Friday night, what would you be doing? Go to the temple! There are no two ways about it. My faith is really, really important to me. It has held



my hand through life. I don't know what kind of person I would be without it. It's made me all that I am today, what I am inside. So I do these things, serve in the temple. I do as much as I can to say 'Thank you' and say how much I really appreciate it."

