

San Francisco's Siva Shrine

Left: The lingam stands in the park among the pieces of an old Christian monastery. Below: Two young devotees offer worship to the svayambu ("self-created") Siva Lingam.



Spontaneous Worship of Large Granite Siva Lingam

Something magical is happening in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Two years ago a five-foot granite Siva Lingam appeared amongst the Junipers and pines, placed auspiciously at the crossroads of three of the park's winding footpaths. The lingam sits among the scattered stone pieces of a 16th-century Christian monastery from Spain that was slated to be constructed on the park land. But the plans were lost and the stones left to gather moss. Although the Lingam has appeared recently among the old ruins, park people don't know where it came from. Passers-by began to offer small gifts of flowers, fruit or a humble namaskaram.

Inspired by the mystical appearance of the stone, Achariya Kali Das and his daughter Maitreya, both from the Sakti Mandir of San Francisco, began to observe a regular worship service at the Lingam. "At first just an 'Om Namasi-vaya' and a flower as we walked by ... slowly we began to notice that others, who we still don't know, made offerings and lit incense." Today the Lingam is covered with sandalwood paste and kumkum, carefully adorned with garlands and

wreaths of roses and vines. The park's rose gardener, who always has an abundant supply of roses, regularly gives them to devotees to offer as gifts to the shrine. "As people come by, they stop there in awe. They know they are experiencing something that is completely unusual, and they become very quiet," explained Kali Das. "Several times Hindu people have come along the path while we were making offerings ... and they immediately joined in." Roses that have been placed on the Lingam as offerings have lasted without change for five days with no water. The shakti of this shrine has been steadily growing along with the number of devotees that come to offer worship. "For people who know what it is, it has become a place of pilgrimage," stated Maitreya.

A number of times in its short history the Lingam has been subject to desecration, each time being faithfully returned to normal. During a morning puja one day a homeless man who lived in the park approached a worshipping devotee. "You know, there are people who come here sometimes to destroy the shrine. But don't worry, I'll protect it." ■