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FEATURED

Bethlehem's first Hindu Temple opens

By MEREDITH SAVITT

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The Albany Sanatani Mandir is shown at 387 Krumkill Road.

Photo provided



NORTH BETHLEHEM — Bethlehem's first Hindu temple, the Albany Sanatani Mandir, will host an event open to the community on January 24. Festivities begin with religious services at 12:30 (puja) and 1:30 p.m. (anjali), followed by a cultural event celebrating the Hindu goddess of education with singing, dance, food, and musical performances by children.

The Mandir, located in a former historic church at 387 Krumkill Road in North Bethlehem, opened in September 2025. Founder Sonjoy Kumar Sikder said the Mandir already has 100 members and hopes to see membership grow to about 250. Sikder said members are joining from throughout the Capital Region, including Colonie, Guilderland, East Greenbush and even as far as Saratoga.



Sikder said he and his co-founding partner and good friend Ratan Kumar Biswas decided to build a temple because they wanted to create a “footprint” for their community. Skider, a civil engineer, said he likes building things and wanted to build something lasting. “People pass on, but your work remains,” he said.

Sikder and Biswas were excited when they scouted the North Bethlehem historic church site for the Mandir. Sikder said its attractions were a central location, parking and the right price – about \$200,000. Biswas and Sikder financed the property purchase themselves.

Sikder said they also appreciated the site’s prior use for religious purposes. “We feel good about that because we are all praying to God to make us good and give us good health,” Sikder said. “People were praying here in this building for 200 years and hopefully this will stay as a religious place.”

Since the August 2025 sale closing, repairs and updates have been ongoing with the help of many volunteers. “Whoever worked on this can feel they are part of the heart of the place,” Sikder said. He added they have no plans to

change the structure, except for possibly adding a small addition in the back of the building to ensure sufficient space for the growing congregation.

The building's back story

Town Historian Bill Ketzer said, "In my opinion, they did a huge service to the Town of Bethlehem, by taking a vacant building and restoring it to a house of worship." Ketzer explained that the church, which was built around 1836, is the town's oldest standing house of worship. Despite having been repeatedly renovated since 1870, it remains historically significant because it stands on its original footprint and its "bones" are still there. "The hand hewed wood beams and joists are 200 years old," Ketzer said.

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Although not landmarked, in the 1980s the New York State Historic Preservation Office deemed the structure National Register eligible.

Ketzer said he believes the structure was last used as a church around 2014. "People are deeply attached to it and having it vibrant and used again is great," he said.

Ketzer also credited Judy Frone, the building's owner and widow of its last Reverend, John Frone, with refusing numerous sale offers made by developers. He understood that Judy Frone wanted the structure to remain standing.

Town of Bethlehem Supervisor David VanLuven said he is happy to see Bethlehem's oldest church "be brought back to life as a sacred space" and said Bethlehem is lucky to have the Mandir there. "We are honored that they chose Bethlehem when they were looking for a community," he said.

Mandir is second capital region hindu temple

Albany presently has one Hindu Temple, the Hindu Temple Society of the Capital District, located in Loudonville and founded in 1976. Sikder said the Mandir caters to the culture of Hindus from Southern India, Bangladesh and

Bengal. He explained that although they share a religion with other Hindus, their culture is a little different. "We wanted to create our own cultural environment and feel free to celebrate the way we want," he said.

He said he also goes to the Loudonville Hindu temple. "There is no conflict between the two temples," he said. "They are just different."

Sikder said the word "mandir" translates to house of the divine and Sanatani is a nickname for Hindu.

According to the Mandir's website, the name was selected to highlight inclusivity and that the temple is a "spiritual home" regardless of nationality or origin. Its mission is to provide a sacred spiritual space for prayer, as well as educating and inspiring individuals through religious and cultural programs and supporting charitable activities.

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Sikder also said positive responses have flowed in from people from many different origins, including Sri Lanka, Nepal and India. "People from so many different countries are coming together to celebrate with us," Sikder said. Numerous neighbors and former church members have also extended welcomes and have told Sikder they are delighted to see the church being used again as a house of worship.

Town of Bethlehem Supervisor David VanLuven paid a visit to the Mandir to welcome members to the community. On his Facebook page, he said, "I'm so pleased to see the building back in use as a sacred place after so many years of being empty!"

The Mandir adds to Bethlehem's growing religious diversity, which includes numerous denominations of Christian churches, the Bethlehem Chabad, the Ariyamagga Vihara Buddhist Center, and most recently in 2022, the Muslim Community of Bethlehem.

Sikder said everyone is welcome to participate in the January 24 event and to share the rice and vegetable dishes that will be served. He mentioned that his daughter, 11, will be among the performers and will play a harmonium accompanied by her brother, 17, on the tabla in honor of the goddess of education. "We feel very good when our kids perform in this way," he said.

"This is a place of worship and no matter what religion you are, you are welcome to our Mandir and to see what we are doing and have food with us," Sikder said.

Tags

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