Tiwari Wields Dharma With Truck and Troupe in Trinidad
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Pundit Doubts Nation's Youth Plan and Takes to the Road To Halt Heavy Toll of Christian Conversions

"Come to Jesus or go to...," Trinidad's Christian evangelists have shrieked to Hindu crowds at giant nighttime tent rallies year after year. Many Hindus "came." Too many for Pundit Tiwari. If no one did something about it, the island's Hindu temples could become vacant warehouses by the Ramayana is that it's a tale about a monkey and a princess. So with a decided "Look out!" spirit, broad - shouldered Tiwari is pumping some adrenaline into his nation's waffling Hindu mind. "Conversion is a betrayal of dharma!" he comments with the sharp, threatening tone of "a Dad upset." The Hindus of this Caribbean tropical archipelago love it. They are tired of seeing their sons and daughters suddenly come home wearing crosses and spouting anti - Hindu slogans - tearing up the family in the process. So if the pundit wants to get a little upset raise his voice and call conversion "betrayal," that's just fine with those who see his evangelical zeal an apt response to the Christian threat.

Tiwari is armed and ready. But this 47 - years - old family man's weaponry is all peaceful: truck, microphone, drummers, Ramayana, strong floodlighting, big speakers, a brilliant mind and commanding presence. His truck sets up in the afternoon and by nightfall his well - tooled orchestra of kirtan musicians and minstrels has a crowd "moving the Spirit-" Hindu, that is.

Ramesh Tiwari then mounts a spindly podium on the spacious truck bed. As the music dies and the still silence of a captive audience sets in, the pundit offers a

short prayer and launches into his "Hindu crusade." Pacing to and fro with microphone in hand - the other alternately gesticulating and clenching - he thrills the crowd with passages from the Ramayana, often comparing it with the Holy Bible. He orates in English - concurring with Christians that the winning medium for today's youth is English - and calls his roadside evangelism Nagar Satsangh, "Marketplace Congregation." It's been the Hindu pride of Trinidad cane roads since 1988.

Pundit Tiwari's formidable grip on comparative religion allows him to inform his countrymen of Hinduism's grandfatherly role in religious history and intellectually wrestle to the ground anyone who maligns or misrepresents Hindu belief. He enjoys showing that the Ramayana, scribed in 500 BCE, contains much knowledge appearing later in the Bible. He also like to quote from Jesus Lived in India, by Holger Kersten, The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ by Nicholai Notovitca and Jesus in India by Hasrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmed - all texts that contend "Christ's missing years" were spent in India practicing yoga and studying Hindu mysticism.

Questioning the Government's Youth Plan

Pundit Tiwari knows more than world religion and how many days it took Hanuman's monkey team to build Rama's bridge to Lanka. He is the Canadian Embassy's Commercial Attach[?] and very government - wise. One of his related concerns in dealing with Trinidad/Tobago's unchecked Christian proselytization is the government's proposed "National System." This program is, according to cabinet minister Lincoln Myers, who has been assigned to supervise its development, "a program of training and service for Nationals." Myers has been working on this project for two years, but the National System is still in the idea stage. Though it hasn't happened, it may - and this scares Tiwari. He sees in this program the possible deculturalization of Hindus, making them easy prey for the country's strong Christian conversion campaigns. Myers swears this won't happen.

The goal of the National System, Mr. Myers told HINDUISM TODAY, is to "provide skills for the unemployed youth, instill a sense of national patriotism and provide moral values for the avoidance of criminality and drug abuse." Tiwari doesn't take issue with these high - minded goals. On the surface, they look great.

But Tiwari and other Hindus contend that the government's intention to mix the country's two main racial groups - Black (predominantly Christian) and Indian (predominantly Hindu) - together without strict supervision in special training camps may stimulate promiscuity and interracial marriage. On a nationwide level, over years, this could produce a blended race with unified national allegiance. Tiwari's main fear here is that the religion of this new racial mix would almost certainly be Christian, not Hindu. Pundit Tiwari also reminds his colleagues and countrymen that whereas the Blacks were deculturalized and converted to Christianity when they came to Trinidad from Africa, the Indian Hindus managed to maintain their religious and cultural identity. He and others don't want to lose that.

Mr. Myers has patiently listened to all these concerns and responds, "In the National System special considerations and respect will be given at all times to the individual's religious rights and beliefs" and that, specifically, "in the case of female participants, systems will be developed to avoid mixing of the sexes in accordance with suggestions received during the consultations."

Hindus have additional doubts. They even question, for instance, the government's understanding of the basic problem the program is intended to solve, i.e. providing quality training for the youth. Hindus contend that training is not the issue. The issue is job availability. There is simply not enough work for the 104,000 youths of Trinidad/Tobago, even if they are well - trained. As for these less supervised trained camps, Hindus are asking, "Why can't this same aspiration be accomplished in the already - existing school systems, which are well supervised?"

Since Trinidad/Tobago is democratic, the National System will be non - compulsory. So even if put into effect, Shri Tiwari won't have to send his daughter Vasthi or son Valmiki off to those allegedly "unsupervised" camps. And even on a non - compulsory basis, it can only go into effect with the full vote and cooperation of the people. It's still premature to second - guess just how the program will finally take shape, but with watchdogs like Pundit Tiwari on the prowl, Trinidadian Hindus can be assured they will be informed of all kinks in this program's implementation.

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