A Capital Youth Event
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EDUCATION

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Massive rally in Washington showcases Pariwar's amazing youth program

Swadhyay Pariwar Youth and Coordinator Interviews

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Keshav Pandya
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An 8,000-strong parade begun from the front of the US Capitol building opened the Swadhyay Pariwar's Vayastha Sanchalan, National Youth Rally, on June 16, 2007. The chain of devotees stretched more than a mile down Constitution Avenue, ending near the Washington Monument where the Pariwar's leader, Didiji, reviewed the marchers. They proceeded in groups of 50 to 100, according to their city of origin. Each group carried banners displaying the principles of the founder, Panduranga Shastri Athavale, known as Dadaji. Slogans carried by the swadhyaees included "God is with me and within me, " "We must have reverence for mankind, for all creatures and for nature; " and "The youth are meant for not merely reading history, but for making it."

Onlookers were struck by the colorful culture and unusual message. They kept asking the Hinduism Today team who attended the event, "Who are these people?

What's going on?" Most were at once delighted and puzzled at this religiously inspired march, which was so different from the usual marching-band style parade.

The Swadhyay Pariwar, "study of the self family, " was founded by Pandurang Shastri Athavale (1920-2003) in Mumbai (www.swadhyay.org). It is today a global organization dedicated to the spiritual upliftment of individuals and society through study, knowledge and discovery of self. The Pariwar aims at universal social revolution and is based on Hindu practices and scriptures, primarily the Bhagavad Gita. It counts millions of adherents worldwide, making it one of Hinduism's largest religious organizations. The Washington, DC, event exemplified Dadji's dynamic campaign to empower youth.

The event drew an estimated 12,500 Swadhyayees, including 3,000 youth. They enjoyed a discourse by Didiji on selfless service, videos of Dadaji preaching and at an immense celebration he took part in near the end of his life. The evening ended with a series of floor shows, most notably the grand finale in which 1,400 youth performed intricately coordinated dances (photo above).

Behind the pride, enthusiasm and devotion among the Pariwar youth is a sophisticated and effective education program administered from India and conducted worldwide by volunteers at weekly meetings on the local level. The discipline, magnitude, wholesome fervor and dedication of time and energy of this conclave and others like it bode well for the future of Hinduism, as youth embrace the teachings and practices of Sanatana Dharma by virtue of their own conviction and determination.

A New Generation

A new generation: Vishal Mody, high-school physics teacher, Illinois; Raaghav Pandya, New Jersey; Keshav Pandya, New Jersey; Mrs. Ami Majumdar, high-school English teacher, Ohio. All were born in the USA. Hear the complete audio of these interviews in our Digital Edition: http:/www.hinduismtoday.com/digital

Vishal Mody, 26

"A very small percentage of Indian youth have any sense of their religious and spiritual heritage. Young people are struggling to create their identity in an unfamiliar culture which is not knowledgeable about their religion, while being raised another way at home. At the same time, you are who you are--sometimes that creates a lot of confusion. I had a lot of Indian friends who were ashamed. I began to feel the very same way, I tried to disassociate and was very confident and very proud of it. My mom had to drag me kicking and screaming to Bal Sanskar Kendra at age 13.

"Going to Swadhyay's Vidya Peeth (a kind of college of religion) in India at age 19 transformed my understanding of the culture. I went for one year during 2000 and 2001. To sum it up, it's simple living and high thinking. In a typical day you wake up at five in the morning, prayers at 6 am, surya namaskar, Indian philosophy, study of both Western and Indian literature, study circles, evening prayer and classes again.

"Because a lot of the ideas in Hinduism are very abstract, they become misunderstood. The Western world portrays it in a certain way and we begin to accept that way of understanding. But Dadaji took these high ideas from our scriptures and simplified them. It just made so much more sense. I think the idea of indwelling God is such a simple idea, incredibly powerful and transformative. It's not a set of rules or a set of guidelines. It's an internal change in outlook."

Raaghav Pandya, 13

"I have been going to Bal Samskar Kendra since I was born. From Gandhi I learned about nonviolence through which he helped India gain freedom from the British. He told people to always say the truth. If someone tries to hurt you, don't ever fight back. Just stay calm. From Dadaji I've learned fearlessness, because God is always within me. I can do it. I can try my best at anything, and God will always help me.

"The most important thing for children is to remember that God is with you, because, if you remember that God is with you, you won't ever do anything wrong. People in school say swear words. But, if you remember that God is with you, then you'll know that is not right. It's my inner conscious that's going to tell me not to say those words."

Keshav Pandya, 11

"I'm in fifth grade. In the Gita elocution contest I learned that other is not other, he is my divine brother, that we are all brothers under the Fatherhood of God. God resides in all of us, so we should all treat others equally. And that's it. I really enjoy our Bal Sanskar Kendra classes. We learn all about our Indian history, our epics, different Gods, our religion and about great leaders that helped make us what we are right now. I like how Dadaji said he trusted three things: youth, God and shruti (scripture) and that God's work should go all around the world and we should all do it together. One of my favorite authors is Leo Tolstoy."

Mrs. Ami Majumdar, 27

"I started Bal Samskar Kendra back when I was about six years old. My identity as an Indian and a Hindu was formed in those years of elementary school--every Sunday going to the Swadhyay Centers with my parents, my whole family, my grandparents, meeting friends there, getting to know the scriptures. It started out just as something that was fun. In junior high school, the understanding started to kick in. I was thirteen when I went to India. I got a chance to visit some of the experiments that Dadaji has done in fishing and farming villages. It hit me that it wasn't just me in my little city in California. It was millions of youth, young children and people all over the world who were living by a certain set of principles.

"We did national and local cultural programs together. I'm a classical Indian dancer, so it was an amazing opportunity to be able to offer the dance form, that made me who I was, towards God's feet. What always struck me was this collective spirit of bhakti, how everyone got together and contributed. And the whole thing of the ego dissolving; you really feel that when it's not you. Although you are offering something, it's not yours anymore and so there's something pretty profound in that experience.

"What has kept the youth as Swadhyees? One of the biggest things is that both Dadaji, and Didiji really have demonstrated and lived every principle that they've ever spoken of. And I think there's something in youth that really responds to 'walk the walk,' not just talking the talk. Also the intellectual approach towards Hinduism--that it really is more than a set of rituals, that there's an understanding

behind it. For future generations, unless they're intellectually convinced, they are not going to do anything.

"The Bhagavad Gita elocution contests are worth mentioning--about 3.5 million youth all over the world speak each year and the number is growing. It always struck me: Christian youngsters holding and reading Bibles. You don't see that as much with Indian children and their scriptures. So one thing that Dadaji and Didiji did was put the Gita in our hands and say: 'You find the quotes. You find what you want to do and then make it your own.' I think that's been a very powerful experience for myself as well as everyone else who has done that."