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Tens of Thousands Honor Gurudeva and Greet His Devotees as Western Brethren

The 1981 India Odyssey Inner-search pilgrimage through Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India returned to America on February 8th. Gurudeva, master Subramuniya, and 33 Western devotees had been met with unprecedented hospitality, love and appreciation throughout their yatrai. The spiritual life of the homecoming pilgrims - some of whom had been to India and Sri Lanka several times while others were first-time travelers - had been richly rewarded through personal contact with the ancient roots of their religion, Saivite Hinduism.

An affectionate and often elaborate reception awaited Gurudeva everywhere, which the pilgrims were honored to take part in, seeing firsthand their beloved Aasaan's worldwide influence and stature. The various publications which have been distributed by Saiva Siddhanta Church in the East have had a profound effect and entire villages turned out to see and meet the Guru who was so actively promoting the ancient Saivite religion in the West. In response to their requests, Gurudeva gave many short talks along the way, inspiring the people to live their religion - the greatest on the earth - fully and teach it to the next generation. At the large gatherings, he would personally introduce the recently published Catechism and Creed for Saivite Hinduism as a text which should be used for teaching the religion to the young.

Space in our small newspaper is not sufficient to mention all the experiences and events of this spiritual odyssey. We hope that each and every one of the sincere guests and hosts, of which there were uncounted numbers who helped us on the pilgrimage, will understand if we do not mention them by name. In this report we will attempt a brief summary of only the major activities in each country.

MALAYSIA

Malaysia was our first principal stop after a day in Hong Kong. This country, with a large minority Hindu population, was once part of the great kingdoms established from South India. It has 15,000 Hindu temples and shrines. The country is prospering both economically and religiously; in fact, it is one of the most religious countries we have seen, with places of worship on every corner.

Our few days there were as the guests of the Malaysian members of Saiva Siddhanta Church under the able coordination of N. Thiruvassagam. We visited the famous Batu Caves Muruga temple, a breath-taking natural limestone cave several hundred feet up the side of a cliff. On Thai Pusam over 700,000 devotees were there to worship Lord Muruga. That evening at the central Maha Mariamman Koyil, a Shakti temple in Kuala Lumpur we participated in a reception and talk by Gurudeva attended by about 2,000. The following day we were hosted by a very active Hindu Youth group to a most exquisite and elaborate puja at the Siddhi Vinayaga Temple, which was done in Gurudeva's honor and lasted for about five hours, with world-class music on temple horn and drum throughout. Our friend and Malaysian representative, Thiruvassagam, had a surprise for us - he had arranged for the translation of a Tamil edition of one of Gurudeva's Inspired Talks, "Courage, Courage, Courage," and presented the beautifully printed pamphlet to a delighted Guru.

Most notable in Malaysia is the participation of the young people in the religion. Many of the temples have very strong youth groups who energetically promote the activities of the temple and see that it is clean and well cared for. The material prosperity of the country is nicely directed to supporting all of its diverse religions. Gurudeva was very pleased to see this support of the youth and emphatically encouraged them to become even stronger in their commitments to religion, studying its scriptures and pursuing the depths of its worship.

SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is the spiritual home for Saiva Siddhanta Church, for it is here that Gurudeva was trained and initiated into Saivism and the illustrious Siva Yogaswami Guru Paramparai. We spent our first night in Colombo and attended puja the

following day at the ancient Ganesha temple at Captain's Gardens. We left a midday for Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of Ceylon and now a sylvan resort. Here, for three days and nights, we held catechism classes in the same forests where the Buddha once taught, shared a traditional Thai Pongal festival with a local Brahmin family and visited historic sites in the area.

From Anuradhapura we drove to Alaveddy at the northern tip of Sri Lanka and proceeded to Sri Subramuniya Ashram, Gurudeva's ashram established by him in 1949. The greeting was most loving, made enchanting by the dozen or so small girls, dressed in white, who danced and strewed flower petals upon the path which our Gurudeva walked. This orthodox stronghold of Saivism is our inspiration for worship, sadhana, philosophy and culture, and the days ahead, were, as expected, the highlight of our journey. The pilgrims stayed at the homes of local families and the resulting kinship of Yogaswami's Eastern and Western disciples will always ornament our memories.

Activities here centered around the Ashram. A number of meetings were held with members of the Ashram and the local community. A special gathering honored the 150 children who participate in the Ashram's school, with delightful poems and welcoming addresses recited by members of their graduating classes. The Ashram governing committee, under the able guidance of Mr. Arunasalam, President, was instrumental in coordinating the fine arrangements during the next four active days.

We attended puja at several temples in the area, notably the Kumbalavalai Ganesha temple in Alaveddy for a Sankabishekam, a puja done with 1008 conch shells; the Keerimalai Sivan temple for the Pirathosha festival for Nandi; and the Nallur Kandaswami temple for an elaborate Shanmuga Archanai. We were also invited to a number of homes in the area for meals or light refreshments. In fact, so many invitations were received it was possible to accept only a few.

Another special event was the inauguration of the Lady Ramanathan endowment lectures, a series dedicated to the Saiva religion and culture. Arranged entirely by the noted Saiva Mangayar Sabai (Association of Saivite Women), the series will bring a qualified lecturer to several of Sri Lanka's university campuses each year. For the opening 1981 season the renown Dr. B. Natarajan was invited, opening the first of four lectures with a talk on "The Tirumantiram: Fountain-spring of Saiva Siddhanta." The televised event opened with Gurudeva's formal blessing and

introduction of Dr. Natarajan and closed with the eloquent words of Mrs. Ratna Navaratnam on behalf of the organizing association. In all, the evening was a highly successful indication of the renaissance which Saivism is enjoying in public and academic circles in Sri Lanka and India.

In a final address to members and guests of the Ashram, Gurudeva offered a few important guidelines for the future. He encouraged them to use the word Saivism instead of Hinduism and stressed that the Ashram be used for strictly religious purposes and philosophical discussion, allowing no discussion of business or politics within its precincts. He emphasized the need for Saivites in the East and West to work together for the benefit of our religion, that each had something special to offer the children of the next generation, for which the Ashram is dedicated. "Education is the key," he said, "It is needed to show how the Saiva Dharma can be lived in the modern world to today. Knowledge of the Saiva religion is the highest knowledge. We want to bring the ancient traditions back to power...We must realize that the Saivite children need to learn about their religion in Saivite schools. It is harmful and confusing for them to go to Catholic or Protestant schools eight hours a day and learn one set of beliefs and then hear the opposite at home. They end up confused, rejecting both and having no religion to console them in late life. It hurts us to see this happening, and we hope it will soon change. It is a serious problem. It is greed which causes the problem, but the price is too high to pay. The price is the mind of our youth, and they are the future of Saivism. The Christians are not giving a free education because they want to educate the Saivites. Their intent is to convert the children to Christianity, away from Saivism. We know this, and we want to see Saivites build schools for their own children and their children's children. Siva Yogaswami taught us to be strong, and with his blessings we will succeed."

After a final luncheon - the food in Alaveddy is unequalled in all the world - we drove to Colombo with a night's stop over in Anuradapura. The major event in Colombo was a reception sponsored by the Eelathu Thiruneri Tamil Manram, whose president, Mr. S. Gunanayagam, concluded his beautiful welcoming address with the words, "Expressing our deepest gratitude to you, Gurudeva, the reverend swamijis and all devotees of the Church for having accepted our invitation and graced this occasion. We conclude with a fervent prayer to Lord Siva that the noble mission undertaken by the Saiva Siddhanta Church and its members should grow from strength to strength and spread light both to the West as well as to the East." We left Colombo feeling unworthy of such a fond reception and speechlessly grateful for the profound spiritual moments, the high-mindedness of our brothers and sisters in Lanka and especially thankful to Dr. S. Sanmugasundaran, the Church's Sri Lanka representative, who had so efficiently seen to a complex array of details. It was our Dr. Shan who had personally sponsored a reprint of "stand

Strong for Hinduism," distributed to the 600 people at the Saraswati Hall reception.

INDIA

India - land of fifty thousand shrines and temples, the Holy Land from which Saivism has spread out through the world since ancient days. We approached India with great expectations. Though Saivism is strong in other lands, it is here that the great temple gopurams rise above every village. We had seen many fine temples in Malaysia and Sri Lanka, but for sheer size, they could not compare. Even a small temple in India is big by other standards and the big temples are enormous monuments to the vibrant dedication of the Tamil people.

Paramaguru Siva Yogaswami said "Sacred is secret, and secret is sacred." So we must pass over some of the more intimate experiences and events at temples and others places over the next twelve days in honor of their sacredness.

Our first stop in India was Cape Comorin where we visited the Kumariamman temple and the most striking Vivekananda Rock Memorial. From Cape Comorin we proceeded to Tiruchendur to the Subramaniaswamy. Thirukoil, the famous Muruga temple situated right on the sea. The Tiruchendur temple is rightly renowned for its powerful vibration. We enjoyed excellent pujas, concerts and the procession of the golden chariot around the temple. The temple has two very well-trained elephants which specially blessed the two small children with us. During one very special evening Gurudeva was honored by several prominent Saivite institutions, given a series of wonderful welcoming addresses, which they had typeset and printed for the occasion. It was most rewarding for us all to see his work and mission so appreciated and honored half way around the world in this staunch Saiva community, a community which obviously has committed itself to "preserving, protecting and defending Saivism," as Gurudeva expressed it.

From Tiruchendur we drove to Madurai with a stop in Tuticorin where the entire village turned out to offer their hospitality to Gurudeva. Thirty-five separate institutions had banded together to organize the event which was held in a clean and radiant Siva temple, and was attended by several thousand Saivites. Seated upon a raised platform, Gurudeva was showered with praise by one and then

another, as representatives from each of the groups offered him a flower garland. Garland followed garland, until one of the swamis had to begin taking them off even as they were being placed around his neck. When it was over, there was a mound of flowers five feet wide and three feet high! A loving and electric reception which will always give Tuticorin a special place in our hearts.

There is much Christian missionary activity in this area, and Gurudeva stressed again the need for good religious education for the children in Saivite schools. He told a roaring crowd, "In the United States and Canada and everywhere in the world Saivism is becoming a respected and universal religion. It is a religion of love. Siva is a God of love. If you worship God Siva, you will be filled with love...I would like to show you our newest publication and speak briefly about it. It is called Saiva Dharma: A Creed for Saivite Hindus, and it gives the beliefs of our religion in a most concise way, beautifully illustrated. I want to read these beliefs to you so you can learn an important lesson. The first belief says, 'I believe Lord Siva is God whose Absolute Being, Parasivam, transcends time, form and space.' Is that a Christian belief, or a Moslem belief or a Buddhist belief? No, it is not. We believe it with all our heart. The second is 'I believe Lord Siva is God whose immanent nature of Love is the substratum or primal substance and pure consciousness flowing through all form.' That is not a Christian belief. In fact, it is considered heresy by the Catholic Church for anyone to believe this. But Saivites do believe it, in fact know it to be so. Here's the third one, 'I believe Lord Siva is God whose immanent nature is the Primal Soul, Supreme Mahadeva, Siva/Sakti, the Creator, Preserver and Destroyer of all that exists.' That is not a Christian belief. But it is our belief. 'I believe that each individual soul is created by Lord Siva and is identical to Him, and that this identity can be and will be fully realized by all souls when the triple bondage of anava, karma and maya is removed through His Grace.' Of course, we know that is not a Christian belief. 'I believe in three worlds of existence: the First World where souls take on physical bodies; the Second World where souls take on astral or mental bodies; and the Third World where souls bodies, Mahadevas, exist in their own self-effulgent form.' That is not a Christian belief. 'I believe in the Mahadeva Lord Ganesha, son of Siva/Sakti, to whom I must first supplicate before beginning any worship or task.' That is not a Christian belief, is it? 'I believe in the Mahadeva Lord Muruga, son of Siva/Sakti, whose Vel of Grace dissolves the bondages of ignorance.' That is not a Christian belief either. Here's the eighth belief of the Creed: 'I believe that religion is the harmonious working together of the three worlds, and that this harmony can be created through temple worship, wherein the three worlds become open to one another, and the beings within them are able to communicate.' The Christians don't believe that. 'I believe in the law of karma - that one must personally reap the effects of all actions he has caused - and that each soul will continue to reincarnate until all karmas are resolved and moksha, liberation, is attained.' This is a most central belief in the Saivite Hindu religion, but it is entirely against the teachings of the Christian faith. The believe there is one life, and that the soul goes to heaven or to hell forever after that one life is

over. This is such a beautiful belief of ours. Here is the tenth belief: 'I believe that there is no intrinsic evil.' It goes without saying that the Christians don't believe that, for they believe in an eternal Hell and in a Devil or Satan who opposes God. We believe that everything is God's work, that no power can oppose Him. We believe every movement of every atom is God's benevolent action and we strive to see God everywhere. 'I believe that the performance of Chariya (virtuous and moral living), Kriya (temple worship) and Yoga (internalized worship and union with Parasivam through Grace of the living Sat Guru) is absolutely necessary to bring forth the state of Jnana.' The Christians simply do not believe that. And our last belief: 'I believe in the Panchakshara mantram, the five sacred syllables 'Na Ma Si Va Ya,' as the foremost and essential mantram of Saivism.' Do the Christians believe that? No. They do not believe a single one of these twelve central beliefs which form the basis of our religion. I wanted to present this to you for a reason, to show that all religions are not the same. They are one at the top of the pyramid, one in their striving toward God, but they are not the same on this earth plane. They are not one in their beliefs. They have different spiritual goals and therefore different attainments. We must not forget this and be taken in by those who say all religions are one. They believe different beliefs, and since our beliefs create our attitudes, they hold different attitudes toward life and death and the soul and God, too.

You can remember this when a missionary comes to your door. Welcome him with 'Namaste.' Tell him that we have a Catechism of our own. We have a Creed and an Affirmation of Faith in our religion, too. We have our scriptures, our Holy Bible of Saivite Hinduism. We have religious leaders and a tradition that is vastly more ancient than any other. We have our holy temples and our great Gods. We are proud to worship God and the Gods. We have all this and more. Thank you very much. And then close the door!"

In Madurai is the famous Meenakshi temple, a very large temple covering about four city blocks right in the middle of a bustling town once called the Athens of India. This temple is particularly complex, its endless corridors leading to numberless shrines and subshrines, inner and outer sanctums, murals depicting Puranic stories and so on endlessly. Its towering gopurams are the largest in the world. One could easily wander for days exploring it. We were brought to the innermost sanctum for our special puja, a particular honor. We also visited the nearby Muruga temple at Thirupparankundram, said by a guide to be as much as thirty thousand years old. One of the true highlights of our stay there was the reception given at the highly respected Madurai Aadheenam whose work in South India parallels the Church's mission in the West. The head of this traditional monastery is His Holiness Sri-la-Sri Arunagirinatha Sri Gnanasambhanda Desikar, the 292nd successor in an unbroken tradition. Like his predecessors he is

determined to preserve and strengthen the Saiva Dharma, and he is most capable of doing just that. Our reception at the Aadheenam, which is just a quarter-mile from Meenakshi temple, was highlighted by a brotherly welcome to Gurudeva and pilgrims, a generous lunch and discussions of the work currently undertaken by the aadheenam. Their mission in the East is parallel to that of the Church in the West, and includes religious education, conversion back to Saivism for those who have been led into other faiths, public lectures, classes, radio programs and more.

From Madurai we traveled to Palani, but four pilgrims trekked separately with Gurudeva to Suruli Hills, the remote abode of Swami Jaganathan who has long been in correspondence with the Church and had invited Gurudeva to his cave. So remote it was that the entire group could not join gurudeva. The journey required several hours by car, a few kilometers in three jeeps and when the jeeps could no longer navigate the terrain, further on foot! Here, high above the Southern plain, lives a true holy man. Swami Jaganathan has observed silence for more than twelve years, and he communicated with us by writing with chalk on a small slate tablet. We enjoyed a refreshing bath in the pure and pristine waters of the famed Suruli Falls - which are said to be health-giving and restorative - then Gurudeva was called upon to install a small Ganesha Deity in Swamiji's cave, following traditional rites. There followed a contemplative meditation in Swamiji's small chamber carved into solid rock just behind the main cave. A most noteworthy dimension of our suruli visit was the vibration and the people. Both exude a rare boliness, shakti and devotion, clearly the result of much tapas, sadhana and mystical practice, coupled with devotion to their beloved Swami. These disciples later traveled to Madras where they presented Gurudeva with a solid silver five-foot Vel for Kadavul's Muruga shrine.

Meanwhile, the pilgrims had arrived at Palani, the most famous of the Muruga temples in South India. Situated on a hill that rises above the arid flatlands, it is reached by climbing 689 wide stone steps. We arrived just in time for the evening chariot procession. Our main puja was the following morning. Lord Muruga was dressed first as a king or raja and then as the ascetic renunciate. After the puja, the pilgrims stayed on the hill, some visiting Bhogar Rishi's shrine, some discovering a remote hillside cave below and others just sitting to absorb the great shakti of Lord Muruga. Only at Palani did we encounter yogis and sadhus filled with the power of their sadhana, radiating love and enlightenment from their serene eyes. Our stay felt so short that Palani was difficult to leave for many of us, and it was made dear by a special evening of Veda Parayana by twelve Brahmin boys and a talk by Gurudeva to the elders of the community.

But leave we did, to our next stop of Tiruchirappali. We had a particularly nice visit to the Thiruvanaikoli temple there, a Siva temple where a natural spring keeps the Siva Lingam in the inner sanctum always immersed in water. We proceeded from Tiruchy to Chidambaram via Thiruvaroor. We were able to make a long anticipated visit to the Dharmapura Aadheenam. This aadheenam is another stronghold of Saivism, its influence and authority are felt throughout Tamil Nadu. Our afternoon there included an important and informative exchange between Gurudeva and the Aadheenakartar, His Holiness Srila-Sri Shanmuka Desika Gnanasambandha Paramachariya Swamigal, twenty-sixth successor in the holy lineage of the founder, Guru Jnanasambandhar. Their meeting touched on the status of Saivism in the East and the West and plans were proposed to strengthen the religious life of Saivites who leave their homeland and must live in alien cultures apart from spiritual leaders and Saiva influences. A lavish and much-welcomed lunch followed, consisting of dozens of curries and chutneys served on enormous banana leaves (most of our meals were taken in the traditional style throughout the journey). Next came a reception during which Gurudeva addressed the large gathering in the pavillion near the tank and received from the hands of the Aadheenakartar a most precious gift - a solid silver casket or chest with a seated image of Saint Meykandar, in which had been placed a beautiful message of welcome to Gurudeva, printed and carefully rolled into a scroll. But that was not the end of the benevolence of this great man. He also presented to Gurudeva a set of solid gold earrings specially made for the heads of Saivite monasteries, and placed them himself in the ears of his honored guest from America. A chief disciple of the Aadheenakartar explained during the ceremonies, "Though Master is already an achariya, this ceremony is the formal rite conferring achariyahood upon him." Master and the two swamis traveling with him also received a set of kavi, the traditional saffron robes of the Sannyasin. It is most difficult to express in a few words the sense of humility and respect we all felt at Dharmapura Aadheenam. We pray that Siva's Grace will shower upon their work and mission and that we may assist their undertakings in some small way from the West.

Chidambaram is one of the most famous of Siva temples and rightly so. It was one of the high points of our visit, so powerful were the pujas there. A special puja was done with two ancient images of the temple, a small crystal lingam and a small Nataraja carved from a massive crimson ruby. This latter piece is one of the original idols of the temple and is particularly renowned. After the elaborate abhishekam to this image, the camphor light is both passed in front and in back of the image. When it is in back it shines through the ruby image in a startlingly beautiful manner. It is a duty of every Saivite to visit Chidambaram once in his life, and we learned that the blessings of such a visit are well worth the effort.

From Chidambaram, which must rank along with Tiruchendur as the pilgrims'

worshipful highpoint of the Odyssey, we traveled to Madras via Mahabalipuram where we visited the craftsmen who had carved the enormous Nandi for our temple in Hawaii. Once in Madras, we were busy with departure arrangements, shopping and so on, while Gurudeva was meeting each morning and afternoon, and even up to one in the morning, in his suite with an endless stream of devotees who came for darshan. We became acquainted with many particularly fine Saivites at these gathering, of which much could be reported if space but allowed.

On our final night in India a special dinner was arranged at the Connamara Hotel to say goodbye to our friends and to offer a special "thank you" to those who made the journey so successful. From among the pilgrims, Indivar Sivanathan received a sari for her tireless and professional work as official photographer. Ravi Peruman and Nitya Nadesan shared gifts and accolades for their engineering of the recording equipment, and the swamis were thanked for their classes, their co-ordination of the many details, and mostly for their patience. Most deserving of all were Mr. N.K. Murthi, the South Indian representative of the Church, and Mr. C. Nachiappan, principal of Kalashetra Publications, one of Madras' leading presses. These two devotees worked tirelessly juggling a thousand and eight things at once while appearing most composed. Without them the weeks in South India would not have been so rich and rewarding for us, and the rousing applause they received shook the building.

We left Madras on February seventh for Singapore, proceeding on the following day to Honolulu and San Francisco. The pilgrims arrived home safely, a bit tired and suffering from "Jet-lag." Still, with a large measure of self-discipline and some help from Lord Ganesha we had been remarkably successful in preventing illness along the way, always a problem for travelers. Every pilgrim was left with a lifelong memory of fine temples, pujas and receptions by the gracious Saivites who were our hosts in the various lands, memories which will serve well in living the Saiva Dharma in a Western world.

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