Vaishnava Viewpoint
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New Saivite World: Mr. Poddar, you have spoken with us about the reluctance among many Indians in America to speak of or bring forward their Hindu heritage. Why this apparent shyness?

Mr. Poddar. Well, you have heard me mention a person by the name of Lord Macaulay, who was sent to India [around 1830] to figure out a way to subdue the population. He was put in charge of the education policy of India and after a great deal of study he came to the conclusion that the Indian culture was vastly superior to the British culture. And he said the only way the British are going to be successful in ruling over India is to educate a class of people who would look down on their own religion and their own tradition. And that is exactly what he set out to do in his education policies, and he didn't make any secret about it. He wrote it down and it is available for anybody to read it.

Q: Did He succeed?

A: I think he succeeded marvelously. Having been educated in that tradition, I had to overcome my own negativism about orthodoxy, Hindu religion and Hindu culture. And it was a struggle.

Q: Having come through the Macaulay system, how did you overcome it?

A: I was born in an orthodox Vaishnavite family. We had bhajans and daily pujas, and everybody in the family had personal deity worship daily. As a child, I did worship as early as I can remember, maybe as early as five or six years old, until 12 or 14 when I was just getting into my middle grades in school. And with that

influence we just spoke of, I just dropped it and kind of looked down on it. So, I didn't start our with that negativism. It slowly came-imperceptibly, without anybody saying so-though the school process...

At eighteen I came to the United States, so I got even further steeped in the Western ideas. Everything that was Western I took as automatically good, and anything that was Indian, I looked down on and criticized. I found that most of my Indian friends who were new to the United States were in about the same boat, but the people who had been settled here said, "Wait a minute, don't be so quick." I would vehemently argue with them about the good things. Slowly, as I started living and I started making American friends and saw the conflicts they were going through-whether with their parents or with their girlfriends or boyfriends and their divorces and what happened to their children-I began questioning. As a matter of fact, one of the aspects of rediscovering my Indianness or my Hinduness was my American friends who started asking me questions. I realized that I didn't know! I was ignorant. But I think the fundamental thing has to be the samskaras I got in early childhood. I talked to a number of Hindu parents, and they say they are not going to impose their beliefs on the children-of course, they have no beliefs they can articulate anyway-and they will let their children decide. But the question is, if the child is not exposed to these things in his early, formative years, how is he ever going to discover them?

Q: Could you comment on the Hindu organizations in America that you feel are effectively serving the Hindus?

A: There are very few truly Hindu organizations who address the needs of the Hindu community on a national level. For example, Ramakrishna Mission does not use the term "Hindu" to identify themselves at all and they are not here to primarily serve the Hindu community...Exceptions to this are such groups as the Chinmaya Mission, Sri Rajarajeshwari Peetham Holy Shankarachariya Order, or Gurudeva's efforts and the Saiva Siddhanta Church, and others.

Now, we have a lot of local groups, and most of the Hindu activities can be broadly clubbed under the umbrella of temples. But they are limited in the sense that they provide the ritualistic atmosphere without the content of the philosophy or even going further beyond the worship to the actual practice of Hinduism, because Hinduism is not limited to temple worship.

Q: I think you are familiar with the Livermore Hindu temple project of building a temple with two main sanctums. What is your view on the plan?

A: I simply know that in temples where they have not established a single deity and either they have no deity and they bring in a photograph or they have a multiplicity of deities, sooner or later things just simply break down. On issues such as this, even if you may not be able to intellectually contradict the objectives of one particular group up wanting to do that, you almost have to fall back on tradition. Can you think of any temple in India where there are two presiding deities? It's like having two kings in one kingdom. I know why it is done. It is done to unite people of different views. It is done to unite Vaishnavites and Saivites and to bring in everybody else.

Q: For you and for your fellow Indians who may also be Vaishnava, what does the Hare Krishna group and movement represent?

A: I don't think they necessarily represent all the Vaishnavites in the world, and to me the Hare Krishna movement is attempting to assimilate and adopt the Vaishnava ways, but they have quite a ways to go...The devotees of Hare Krishna movement would be the first to admit that they are waiting for the next generation that is growing up in gurukulams to come up to really be true Vaishnavites...

I support the Hare Krishnas' efforts. I think they have been partly misunderstood, and partly they are responsible for that misunderstanding also. They have had a very aggressive policy of airport solicitation which often has bordered on being unethical. Whenever I have tried to discuss it with their followers, they said anything that is in Krishna's service is justified. I am not sure that's what Prabupada's teaching was, but how it has been practiced has certainly given them a negative public image. But I have seen a lot of change in attitude both on the part of the Indian community towards Hare Krishnas in the last decade, and also in the American community-positive change.

Q: Do you feel the Rajarajeshwari Peetham's identification with the Sri Sharada Shankarachariya Peetham in India gives them greater strength in their work here?...

A: I shared the thought with then that their identification of themselves with the Jagadguru of Sringeri has led in the minds of people the idea that they are part of Jagadguru's mission in the West, which is not correct. They are an independent order, [although] they have the blessings of Jagadguru. So, I have suggested to them that they should publicly state that they are independent and that they are not part of the Order. First of all, Shankarachariya Order does not accept women Sannyasins-number one. Number two, Jagadguru will have to break tradition to do so, and he has not in any of his written indications even said that "You are part of my order." So, to the extent that that doubt remains, people simply don't have full faith and trust. I think they need to have confidence in their own ability and their own commitment to say that they are willing to stand or fall on their own actions. The fact that the Jagadguru gives then a blessing for their work is a plus, but to the extent that people think that they claim they are a part of Jagadguru's Order and they are not-it creates a tremendous credibility gap...

The amount of dedication that those people have put into their work is just unbelievable. I am very supportive, very much full of admiration for their work. Not only funds-wise, I have spent a great deal of time with them, in helping them. I feel really sad that if this issue is not quickly resolved, it could be their downfall...There are other aspects that also concern me. This is that you don't mix men and women in very close proximity. When the Buddhists did that, you know what happened to Buddhism in India. It is not done in India's Shankarachariya Order. You could have the women's order and you could have men's order, but they have to be kept entirely separate.