South Africa Youth Rally for Gurukulam System
Category : March 1994
Published by Anonymous on Mar. 01, 1994

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Apartheid is dead. Raceless elections are due in April and India has agreed to trade again with the repentant diamond capital of the world. You'd think South African Hindus would be dancing in the streets. They're not. Dismantling apartheid is as hellish as the medieval system itself. Pre-election politics are violent and frightening. The million-strong Hindus, housed in segregated "residential zones" (set up during apartheid) are nervous, and huddling tighter. Religion is "on hold." "Great time for a religious conference!" decided the Arya Youth League (AYL). For three days, December 17-19, this energetic youth wing of well-respected Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, staged a show of spiritual force. Forty saffron Aum flags fluttered outside the conference site, the Arya Benevolent Home, a complex of apartments, assembly and dining facilities. Over 400 attended-300 adults and 100 youth. Girls were dressed in beautiful rainbow hues of punjabi silks and cottons. Boys contrasted in designer jeans and a fashion show of logo T-shirts. The event opened with a havan by 82-year-old Pandit Nardev Vedalankar. Speeches and discussions flowed from early day to nightfall, as "youth put their heads together to work out solutions to problems Hindu youth face everywhere," in the words of AYL chairman Bisram Rambilas. Youth cultural performances-mridangam, tabla, dance and vocal-thrilled everyone each night after dinner. Seeing the Hindu arts

survive one more generation always tickles religious nerves. Vegetarian meals were served by AYL youth. AYL leaders like 20-year-old Roshiela Benimadho worked hard to make the event international. There's a chic ring in being "global" these days. Networked, informed. Cosmopolitainism is almost a religion. No one wants to be pegged parochial. Youth especially.CNN has made everyone curious. South Africa youth want to know how other youth are coping with the Western lifestyle seeding everywhere. So, the showing of even a few delegates from Suriname, Mauritius, India and USA was very exciting. The subjects of the conference ranged from scrubbing the caste system to plugging ozone holes, supporting women's rights and defining dharma. But the main focus was "to open doors to the Hindu youth of other countries, build bridges and find out what impression youth abroad have of us." Besides global Hindu-bonding, the conference also addressed how to: protect Hindu culture by employing the gurukulam schooling system in some modern way (see side-bar right) get a reign on drugs, sex, and stress among youth; instill the principle of celibacy as an integral aspect of the brahmacharya ashrama; and make youth more conscious of protecting the environment. The umbrella theme was "Youth in a Progressive Society." Progressive was the buzzword. You heard it a lot over the three days, from youth and adults. Gian Dhunnookchand, Senior Education officer in the Ministry of Education of Mauritius, brought a distinguished but grave tone, elucidating the sad history of dwindling Hindu culture in his homeland. He offered his 20-point progressive cure which included denouncing those who derogate Hinduism and countering anti-Hindu propaganda with Hindu pamphlets. Student of marine biology, Sindhu Bhogal, 21, respectfully reprimanded his peers, "Generally Hindus are not taking a great enough interest in environmental issues." He fed his captive audience fascinating verses from the Vedas to prove

how Hindu scripture is full of intelligent environmental consciousness and strict policies. Environmental stewardship is apparently a prime AYL interest. "Emphasize the importance of cultures that show a reverence for nature," reads AYL literature. "Are these cultures relevant? If they are, then we must declare their relevance boldly!" As elsewhere, AYL youth are discovering that the indigenous societies-many African tribes-have formulas for health and happiness that the chrome, cutting-edge world of technology has cut itself off from. The only real disappointment was that no more than 20 non-AYL South African youth came. "Our Hindu youth just aren't into conferences theses days," one attendee noted unsurprised. One who did attend was the chairman of the National Hindu Youth Federation, Pravesh Hurdeen, distinguishably attired in an elegant kurta. Having attended the VHP's Global Vision 2000 mega-youth event last August in Washington D.C., he noted that the AYL event could have generated more participation from the youth by "breaking into commissions" as was done so effectively in the Washington event. "But tremendous credit goes to these youth for making this event a success. We are fully prepared to work together with them for the promotion of dharma." Dr. Lutchmee Jodhum, a delegate from Mauritius, commented, "This conference stressed that we women must take and serve a greater role in Hindu society." Prakash Tyagi, from India, reflected, "This event has made me start to re-think what exactly is the brahmacharya stage." Besides youth conferences, the AYL holds two very popular dharma camps annually at secluded locations, teaches its members how to perform a fire homa ceremony and regularly serves the Black community, so crippled by apartheid, by giving their schools basic necessities like paper. Though not earth-shaking, the December event triumphed. Just hearing youth chant, "We need to get back to the Vedas," or even bark, "We need to be

more religious than our parents who only think about money!" brought solace to all. Address: 179 Umhlangane Road, Avoca, Durban, South Africa 4051 Tel: 27-31-849639 De-Eurocentrize! One of the most original messages came from 20-year-old Roshiela Banimadho, AYL co-secretary. First she reminded the youth that Hindu dharma is as livable today as in the days of rajas and palm leaf paper. Then she proposed that South Africa Hindu society adopt the ancient gurukula educational method-a modernized form of the ancient system where students lived away from family for periods of time with a guru, teacher learning anything from yoga to puja, scriptures, music, dance or the sciences-and always rigorous character training. What! Today? How would it work? Could it? Who would the gurus be? If the idea excited the audience, they didn't show it. But the plan intrigued Hinduism Today. We interviewed Roshiela later. She shared: "Today our youth are exposed to media where teenage sex, drugs and such vices are openly shown without any understanding, context or perspective. All the problems our youth face are due to this intrusion of Eurocentric culture. Although a gurukulam system might be difficult to establish, we need to take the initiative. And, it would be open to our African brothers and sisters!" In fact, anybody. We are moving into a new South Africa,and we should not be criticized for being 'ethnic.' "Muslim children go to a Madressa (Islamic school) everyday after school. In contrast, our proposed gurukulam system would include both secular and Hindu teachings and comparative religion study. I strongly believe religious tolerance must be inculcated in the child. Even I would like to know much more about other religions besides my own. Since the majority of our children suffer from "absent parent syndrome," in our gurukulam system the parents can visit. It will be a place for youth to develop character so that he or she will serve not only his/her parents but the society at large." Sex is for marriage

The brahmacharya ashrama, educational stage of life (from birth to age 25), was engagingly explored at the AYL youth convention in conjunction with the proposal to institute a modified gurukulam system. Celibacy is considered its pivotal strength. But, "Over 70% of our Hindu youth are sexually active by age 17," a Durban schoolteacher shared. So how do AYL youth and adults feel about sex and celibacy? Rajesh Jantilal collected the following insights for Hinduism Today. Tarun Misra, 25, South Africa: The brahmacharya stage is difficult to carry out here because we are living in a Westernized society. The majority Hindu youth are not practicing it. Youth are dating and choosing their own partners. I've been seeing a girl for nine years and plan to marry her in February, but I draw the line at pre-marital intimacy. This goes against the sacredness of a relationship. Uma Moorgawa, 18, Mauritius: I approve of dating in groups. I am still young and if I go for lunch, or tea with a guy its cool, but I must know him from school days. Premarital sex? No way! But, yes, Hindu youth in my country do date. But, unlike youth in South Africa, they are educated about premarital sex, teen pregnancy, family planning, etc. by the government and our Aryan Women Welfare Association. But I do have friends who engage in such things as premarital sex and they are experiencing problems. Lakshita Hanooman, 20, New Zealand: Brahmacharya is a noble principle of Hinduism, but it should be left up to the individual whether to practice it or not. I certainly am. There's nothing wrong with dating, but premarital sex is out of the question. I don't think the gurukulam system would work here. Youth here are "into their own thing," especially Kiwi Indians who have been in New Zealand for five decades and are into the local Kiwi lifestyle, i.e. totally Western. Fijian and Indian Indians are still proud of their Hindu culture. Sindhu Bhogal, 20, New Zealand (photo on page 26): Definitely the brahmacharya stage is workable here,

and anywhere! It is just going to school like we do now. A new gurukula system for South Africa must be suited to today. Youth attend normal school and when back get involved in the gurukulam. Youth here date to get to know one another before settling down. No, I don't see anything wrong with it.
Rainee Mohit, Education officer in a Roman Catholic School, Mauritius: Our education system is very open compared to South Africa. Sex education is discussed at school levels unlike here where it is still "hush hush."