Ashrams: Quitting the Hotel Business
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Publisher's Desk

Ashrams: Quitting the Hotel Business

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Many hotels closed on our Garden Island of Kauai after the powerful 1992 hurricane, called "Iniki." The tourist business went down to nothing and the devastation is still being discussed. Even now, out of seventy hotels less than six have opened, but the tourists are coming back slow by slow. A similar phenomenon is happening among ashrams and mutts (monasteries) of the Hindu world. Some are definitely going out of the hotel and tourist business, and others are modifying it. Once regarded as places of peace and quiet without wall-to-wall people, ashrams around the planet have become over-crowded with visitors and guests to the point of a daily festival.

In today's ashramic world, guests are not always pilgrims on yatra ready for the hardships of living the simple life. Many are tourists and sightseers. I guess they come to get a sight of the seers in the ashram. True, they pay their way, buy some books in the ashram store, leave a donation, the customary sum, and that is good.

Pilgrims are givers of a different kind, of a spiritual kind. They bring with them the riches of a pure heart, grown mature in meditation and sadhana. They are every ashram's new hope for a better tomorrow. Ashram sight seers, on the other hand, are takers. They absorb the time and energies of the permanent residents, paying their way, but exacting a price greater than their monetary gifts.

It is the head of these organizations and their permanent staff of close

devotees that are most put upon. It was not their intent when they sought out their guru to become hotel managers, bed makers and travel agents. It was not their intent to be baby sitters to groupies who, without commitment, move from one ashram to another, giving their undying loyalties for a time and then moving on when they think they have acquired that place's basic teachings.

To give you a glimpse of the problem, let me share a few instructions that various ashrams provide for residents (not just day-to-day visitors): "Please refrain from smoking cigarettes in local chai shops... Residents must submit a recent AIDS test at the ashram reception desk...Kindly avoid fowl [sic] words and wear clothes at all times, even to bed or when sunning at the seaside." Do you think our ancient rishis would understand the need for such instructions?

Americans and Europeans are looking for that far-off ashram in the hills where nobody goes, but what they find is something like a board walk, with a shopping mall of trinkets and bangles. Then they are asked to behave among hundreds of people as if they were alone. Pilgrims have it worse. Seeking shelter as they move from temple to temple, they find little. It's a sad truth that today there is more silent shelter in the Sheraton or the Oberoi than in some ashrams.

There is a new trend toward more traditional expectations of both visitors and residents. SYDA is getting stricter, as you will read in this issue. And at my own monastery in Hawaii we have had to make firm rules for visitors, lest the merely inquisitive detract real seekers from their path. Tirupati Devasthanam recently pledged US$50,000 to a group in the US for a temple contingent on a Hindu dress code and all devotees becoming veggies. I think it is great. Eating meat and going to the temple don't go well together. Mini-skirts and blue jeans would not be worn to see a head of state or even to go to a fine restaurant. Then why go to God's home dressed that way? Shall we start putting a T-shirt and baseball cap on the Deity? Is that the next step down? We hope not. It seems that there are Hindus who are looking into the future in a different way and closing their doors on the unqualified and the indifferent, and at the same time opening their hearts to the seriously devoted. Yes, a cut in income is expected. But, isn't hotel and tourist money the wrong kind of money for an ashram to run itself on?

The vacation pilgrimage is something that Hindus are getting into. It is disheartening to see them coming to the temple in shorts and caps, dropping in after a golf game. This is called a vacation/pilgrimage. Should it not be just the

other way around, a pilgrimage/vacation? Add to that the medical conventions with the requisite casual look around the local temple (for the children's sake). The kids hang back and turn their heads away. They might rather be at the zoo, and they know mom and dad are just touring, not really worshiping.

Sincere pilgrims begin their journey by fasting in their own homes. They think of nothing but God along the way. When they arrive, it is a joy for all to welcome them, such a difference from those who pose leading questions and point quizzical, whimsical video cameras at the sadhakas. The real pilgrim is who ashrams and temples all over the world were built to receive. Open the doors to those with ash smeared on their heads, whose eyes radiate God's light, who listen to the pontiff's wisdom without asking over and over again the basic questions that can be found in any of several books. It is the pilgrim who knows how long to stay, what to do when he arrives and how to worship, set in motion by the intent made before the pilgrimage. One would not have to tell her "no tank tops, please" or advise him to not hold hands. It has gone too far and religious leaders are realizing this trend is leading nowhere but down.