Dispelling Darkness, India's Divya Jyothi Journeys Westward by Land and Sea
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"I have traveled by land and by sea, through villages, towns and cities, crossing national and international borders. I need neither passport nor visa. Mobbed by the masses and the media, I have visited many countries from Iran to the US. Who am I?"

Few readers will know the answer to this riddle. The traveler posing the question is the Divya Jyoti, also called akhand jyoti, or everlasting flame, created from 52 of the holiest flames in India, making it perhaps Hinduism's most sacred light. In this jet-age of high technology, it is somehow appropriate that this most holy and ancient flame should use modern methods of transport to get to its devotees. The Divya Jyoti was brought to America by Swami Jagdishwaranand of New York's Geeta Temple Ashram, who has been working for almost seven years to realize this dream.

Indeed, this is no ordinary light. The shastrastell us that many eons ago Goddess Parvati had gone to a havan in her father's

home where many kings and nobility had been invited. When Lord Siva arrived, with his matted locks, tiger skin and ash-bedecked body, Parvati's father insulted him in front of all the gathered guests. Unable to bear the humiliation, Parvati jumped into the havan flames.

When the distraught Lord Siva took her body and did the Tandav Nritya, her limbs fell in 51 parts of India and each became a Shakti-Peeth. In each of these 51 holy spots, a sacred flame sprung up - and each has never been extinguished. Besides these 51 spots, there is also the natural light at Jawaladevi, which has been in existence since the world was created by Siva's dance of creation and where the mighty flames rise up like a fiery waterfall in reverse, hitting against the rock wall. Other very holy spots where the flame burns include Chintpurni in Himachal and Vaishnodevi, in Jammu.

When the Geeta Ashram devotees built the magnificent new Divya Dham temple complex in New York some years back, Swami Jagdishwaranand longed to have the blessings of the divine light for his congregation. He knew few people would be able to accomplish pilgrimages to the three holy spots of Chintpurni, Jawaldevi and Vaishnodevi, and certainly hardly anyone would be able to visit all 51 holy spots where the Divine Light glows in eternity.

He decided to embark on an ambitious journey to personally light a lamp from each of the Divine lights at the 51 holy spots, and then simultaneously light one lamp from all 51 lamps, surrounded by the chanting of holy ma ntras, thus

concentrating the shakti and blessings of all the lights in one powerful flame. This Akhand Jyoti would then travel across continents back to America. If people could not go in search of Dharma, then Dharma wo uld come to their doorstep.

Vibha Pathak, a New York housewife and mother of a three-year-old girl, was one of the many volunteers who accompanied Swami Jagdishwaranand to India on this mission. They went to India in January, starting their pilgrimage in Kurukshetra. They were joined by many priests and devotees and embarked on the their journey traveling in an entourage of 30-40 cars and buses.

The procession went to Himachal Pradesh to light the very first lamp from the flame at Chintpurni. This was something which had never been done before, but Swami Jagdishwaranand described the multitudes of Hindus living on foreign shores who may never otherwise have darshan of the flame, and the swamis were persuaded and gave their permission.

In Jawaladevi, the priests suggested they do the puja of 51 small girls and 51 suhagans, all dressed in red, who have the shakti-swarupaor the devi's energy. After doing their puja and feeding them, the devotees went in procession to Jawaladevi where Baba Sharan Puri, who is 110 years old, lit the lamp from the divine light. The next stop was Vaishodevi, where too amongst great pomp and celebration, a lamp was lit from the sacred light there.

The entourage went to Bhadrakali in Kurukshetra, and to

Umaimaata and Calcutta ki Kali. Other swamis were sent to each of the shakti peethas,and gathered the light from each place. Then with many sacred rituals, chanting of mantras and elaborate pujas, one lamp was lit from all 51 holy lamps, and this Divya Jyoti was ready to travel to the devotees.

But bringing it to the believers abroad was no easy task. Since it is a flame, all the airlines refused to carry it due to safety regulations. Finally it was decided that four devotees would take it to Europe via road and from there transport it by ship to America. The journey via Nepal, Tibet and China was thought to be too hard and cold for the devotees so the journey was undertaken through Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Hungary, Austria, Germany, France to the UK. Fortunately, all countries, including Pakistan, gave their full cooperation.

From London, the Jyoti was accompanied by a swami to California, and from California devotees brought it by car to New Jersey. Again there were a host of rules and regulations to follow. Police commissioners and the fire commissioners were in attendence. Swamiji also took advice from the Olympics Committee and navigational experts on keeping the flame safe and secure on the journey.

Vibha Pathak was amazed by the bhatki and fervor of the people in India, where the word of the traveling Akhand Jyoti was communicated from town to town. They stopped in small towns like Dhurie and Khanna. Everywhere the entourage was met by multitudes of devotees who had decorated the town and even their cars with flowers. In small villages people made do with roadside darshans, cooking prasadamon kerosene

stoves right on the curb.

Recalls Vibha, "We had been told that it might be difficult for such a large entourage to be welcomed by townspeople, but we were just overwhelmed by the love and devotion. We reached a small town late in the night and found that a local businessman had decorated the whole place. He had called in 351 sadhus from Haridwar especially for the darshan. He fed everybody, gave the sadhus dakshina, and only after completing the jagran,would he let us go."

But she says the enthusiasm and the excitement has been no less in the US, where vast crowds have gathered at every place the Divya Jyoti has graced. In New Jersey, devotees gathered at the home of community leader and temple patron Nari Lakhani to seek darshan of the Divine light. From there the Divya Jyoti was taken in a grand procession with colorful floats to the Satya Narayan Temple in Queens. Each of the floats had dancers, musicians, devotees and young people dressed up as Siva, Parvati and other Gods and Goddesses. As these colorful and jubilant floats went down the streets of Little India in Queens, thousands of Indians and Americans gathered to catch a glimpse. For many Indian-Americans it was a unique chance to celebrate their faith out in the open, on the streets of New York.

A New Hindu Home

The final destination was the beautiful new temple of Divya Dham, which is a branch of the Geeta Ashram. It is probably

the biggest temple created by any Indian community in the US. From outside, the building looks like an unprepossessing warehouse. Step inside, and you cannot believe your eyes. It is as big as a football field with plenty of room for seva, meditation, talks and prasada for hundreds of people. All the beautiful images of Hinduism's Gods and Goddesses have been specially carved in India, including three black marble Sivalingams which weigh tons.

With great joy and devotion, the Divya Jyoti was installed at the altar, and unending lines of people filed past to get its blessings. Devotees have also been permitted to light a candle from the Jyoti and pray for their heart's desire, for the welfare of their loved ones and the departed souls. These candles are lit while reciting holy mantras and will burn for 24 hours. There will be Devi puja for nine days, each day from nine to six and a continuous havana. After six, there is a daily Kanya puja and then prasada. The new temple already has the gufa or tunnel and also the images of Devi in all her forms, Maha Lakshmi, Maha Saraswati and Maha Kali. Swamiji had longed to install the Akhand Jyoti, which gives these images their power, and now he has succeeded.

Swami's aim has been to reach all Hindus, including those who do not read Sanskrit or know much about the rituals of their faith. In fact, when he first announced in pamphlets that Divya Jyoti was coming to New York, several people called up wanting to know who she was! Some thought the name denoted a swamini or a visiting guru. Well, now the smallest child to the oldest person in the congregation knows the meaning of Divya Jyoti and has taken its darshan.

This effort has meant a lot of labor and expense for the Geeta Ashram and its devotees, but the experience has been very rewarding. The littlest pilgrim who accompanied them through India was Vibha's three-year-old girl. who managed to visit more pilgrimage spots than most people manage in a lifetime. Vibha reveled in the sheer devotion of the people in small towns and obscure villages who welcomed the light with all their hearts and souls, "Every village, town and city was dressed like a bride. In some places even the ground from which the Jyoti would pass was covered with flowers. All the cars were decked with blossoms as if to receive a bride."

Vibha recalls that they passed through small villages in the Punjab where even the Sikhs came out in full force to welcome the Jyoti. In Ludhiana small store owners distributed fruits and sweets to everyone. As one Sikh told Swami, the sacred flame is the mother of the human race and is all important, above caste and creed. In one dusty village the group visited in the Punjab, it had been raining and the ground was a murky mixture of dirt and slush. A young Sikh woman took off her beautiful new dupattaand laid it on the ground so that the light carrier would not get his feet soiled. When Swami told her not to soil her new dupatta,the woman replied simply: "The Akhand Jyoti is the one that has given me this dupatta."

Living in darkness, how can human beings resist the power of light? As Swami Jagdishwaranand explains, the worship of Akhand Jyoti, the Goddess of Power, has been performed in one form or another since the beginning of the world, and a living being is part of the Supreme Soul and always turns away from darkness (ignorance) towards light (wisdom).

Now that the Divya Jyoti, after its world travels, has arrived in its final home, its work is far from over. Swami Jagdishwaranand says he is confident that the Jyoti, which is a representative of the Supreme Spirit, will bring a message of spiritual peace, love, and universal brotherhood. It will be a source of inspiration and enlightenment to the non-resident Indians and all others who think beyond race and color.

Indeed, the Akhand Jyoti can be India's gift to the world. Says Swami, "It is our belief that whatever one has in the form of material or thought can be gifted to others. Today, one can see degradation all over the world. India can be one of the factors involved in bringing happiness, joy and unity to the world by sharing its spiritual knowledge and power, because this spiritualism is inherently present in the mind of every Indian."

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