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INTERVIEW

Hinduism in Africa

My guru guided me to establish a temple and monastery in Ghana to propagate Hinduism

I am a disciple of Swami Krishnananda Saraswati, who propagated Hinduism in Africa and also set up the Human Service Trust in Mauritius. I was born in the traditional African religion. Both my parents were priests. Initially, I became a Christian, but I was searching for the truth. I went through some books on yoga and discovered that Hinduism is a very good religion. It is open minded. It teaches you about God. It also teaches you about the science of the soul. Later on, I decided to go to India. I went to Rishikesh and stayed at Swami Sivananda's ashram, the Divine Life Society. There I found that Hinduism is a straightforward religion that revealed the truth. Later on, I came back to Ghana and tried to practice Hinduism as a normal person. At that time my age was 35

When I came back from India, I organized a group of people. Now, these were not ordinary people. I had university lecturers and lawyers. They were the core of the group that I formed. I exposed them to what I had learned from India. Some of the Indian families also came to my lectures. When Swami Krishnananda came from India, most of the Indians went to meet him. They told him that I had been to India and was

practicing Hinduism. Then they introduced me to him. He told me that what I was doing was perfect, and that I should carry on with it. You see, not many swamis used to come to West Africa. And the ones who did come would stay for a week or two and go back. But it was Swami Krishnanand Saraswati who stayed there all the time. He gave me a lot of encouragement. I told him that I wanted to be a swami. When next he came, he told me that now he was going to fulfill my wish. He initiated me in sannyas. The president of the country attended my initiation in 1975. Then my monastic life started.

My guru told me, "You are the first African swami" and said, "To be a monk, you must get a place for a monastery." At the time, there was no one propagating Hinduism in Ghana. There was no temple or place where the people of Indian origin could go and pray. So my master told them, "What are you doing? You have such a good culture. You must practice it." Since 1975 to the present time we have made a lot of progress, with the blessings of God. I have set up five temples in Ghana and one temple in the neighboring country of Togo. We have no problem with the government. But there are a few individuals who feel threatened. They are scared of the popularity and spreading of Hinduism, and they would like to destroy it.

The future of Hindus in Ghana is very bright. We have to do a lot of work there. My guru told me to help orphans, disabled people and those who are suffering. He told me to do things so that people are attracted to Hinduism. I have been fighting to make Hinduism grow in my area.

My guru kept in touch with me almost till he breathed his last.

When he was last in Ghana, he told me, "Swami Ghanananda, I am going. Now everything is in your hands. Try to do everything that I have told you." He gave advice to all the members. He told me, "Be in this monastery, available to the people here, so that if they need any advice, they can come to you. So, now you do not have to bother about anything, as you have everything with you. Try to meditate." And this is what I am trying to do since he left the world in 1992.

Hindu youth feel very happy after worshiping in the temple. But most of the youth, even Hindu youth in Ghana, act like they are Christians. As they are away from India, they are also away from the Indian values. For instance, most of them eat meat and fish. They like the discotheques. My job is to remind people why they have come to this Earth. We are not here to act like the clowns of a circus. We do not have many drug addicts, but we have people who have other negative tendencies. The challenge in Ghana is to continue with our Hindu practices and stay on the right path.

My message to the youth is that Hinduism should be taken as something which is a way of life and is not just going to the temple and performing certain rituals. By following Hinduism they should be able to lead a very good life, so that when they reincarnate, they get a good birth to continue their spiritual education. For now, they must do all the good that they can. If they do so, their future will be bright. I tell the youth that they must respect the elders and try to learn from them by sitting at their feet. You cannot learn anything if you do not pay due respect to your elders. The youth has to behave humbly and study the scriptures and live the life by the scriptures. Our Hindu youth should set an example for the rest of humanity by

being on the correct path.

So far, I have not initiated any monks in West Africa. You see, Hinduism is a new thing there, and I do not want to make somebody a monk who later on abandons monkhood. It would bring a bad name to me and to Hinduism. I do tell people what is expected of them to become a monk. But there are many people who are just looking for a place to stay. They express their desire to me, but I say, "Sorry", to them. Consequently, I am facing a problem. I want more people to come and join me. I am getting older. I am sixty-five. If I pass away tomorrow, there should be somebody to take over. But at the moment there is nobody to carry forward this work. I pay a lot of attention to the youth, educating them in Hinduism. God's ways are mysterious. Maybe tomorrow someone who deserves to be a monk will show up.

Living as a Hindu in West Africa is not easy. You are threatened. What is needed is positive coverage from the African media. The media must write that Hinduism is something good. They have to tell people that Swami is a messenger of Hinduism like the other swamis of this ancient tradition. If something like this happens, then many of the people will want to join Hinduism. However, the present treatment by the media is not so fair.

Swami Ghanananda, 65, may be contacted at Hindu Monastery of Africa, P. O. Box 13693, Accra, Ghana. The above material is excerpted from his interview with Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malikin

Malaysia in February, 2003, following the Malaysia Hindu Sangam's Hindu Renaissance Rally.