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MINISTRY

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How Gurudeva uplifted families and revived the dharma in Mauritius

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It is a known fact that the sugar island of Mauritius, basking peacefully in the Indian Ocean, is a land of pious temple worship for the general Hindu population. Almost every family here has been associated for generations with one of the many thousands of local temples. Hindu celebrations like Mahasivaratri and Thai Pusam are grand events that often stop traffic with magnificent processions of thousands of people. For the average Hindu, basic religious obligations are fulfilled by participating in such elaborate festivals.

An understanding of the significance of the Hindu guru was almost nonexistent in Mauritius until the 1980s when Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami first set his holy feet upon this island. Not only was Gurudeva an exceptional and singular example of a guru, he was also a great spiritual innovator. He revolutionized the whole concept of Hinduism for many on the island, redefining it from a different and more substantial perspective. This vitalized the inspiration of sincere seekers and began a new era in Mauritiusâthe era of guru bhakti.

It was at this time that I first met Gurudeva. Although I had been studying his teachings through a correspondence course and writing for Hinduism Today, my first encounter with him in person was a memorable experience. I could see immediately that he was not an ordinary man.

He changed my life. The girl I was lucky enough to marry was also one of Gurudeva's students. We were the very first of his devotees to be married in Mauritius. This happened in 1985. Our greatest joy has been to serve Gurudeva by imparting his teachings on the island of Mauritius, which we first did by organizing classes at local temples. After ten years of marriage we despaired of having children. Gurudeva taught us to face our karmas gracefully and to be humble in difficult situations. Shortly thereafter, most certainly with the blessings of Gurudeva, we had two children.

Gurudeva came to Mauritius in the 1980s at the request of Hindu elders who were worried about the high rate of conversion from the Hindu fold. In January, 1982, he spent an entire month here, traveling from village to village with two of his swamis. Following this, he sent a French-speaking monk to live and teach in Mauritius. At one point the monk was holding 25 classes around the island.

In 1986, Gurudeva set up a monastery on a 12-acre parcel of land in Rivière du Rempart. In July of 1988, the establishment of Gurudeva's mission was made official by the Saiva Siddhanta Church Act which was passed in Parliament. Hundreds of people came to the weekly homasheld at the monastery during this time. Today one third of

Gurudeva's Church congregation live in Mauritius. A major part of this land is dedicated to the Spiritual Park, a present from Gurudeva to the people of Mauritius. Today the Spiritual Park at Rivière du Rempart welcomes hundreds of visitors each week. Pilgrims from all around the world say there is nothing else like it—especially not in Mauritius.

This park was created at a cost of several million rupees, all donated by local Hindus. In a beautiful ocean-front setting, it features a Ganesha Mandapam with a nine-foot tall Panchamukha (five-faced) Ganapati—as well as huge granite icons of Lord Murugan in His form as the six-faced Arumugam and Lord Siva, in the form of Dakshinamurti, the silent teacher.

During this time, there was a regular flow of monastics traveling from Kauai Aadheenam, Gurudeva's home in Hawaii, to the monastery here. These monks created the Spiritual Park and held retreats and seminars for thousands of youth around the island.

Meanwhile, Gurudeva advised his family members on the island to use ayurvedic medicine and adopt a healthy diet, including raw sugar, brown rice and brown bread. He encouraged us to wear Hindu dress at home,

in the temples and during festivals. Several Mauritians have completed a six-month training at Kauai Aadheenam, where we presently have a Mauritian monk who is one of the Aadheenam's foremost priests.

Koothan, 52, a primary school head teacher in the south, says, "One day Gurudeva asked me if I was a vegetarian. I answered that I was waiting for Gurudeva's blessings. Gurudeva immediately said, 'Here is my blessing, are you now a vegetarian?' I answered, 'Yes,' and today my whole family has discovered from personal experience how vegetarianism can help spiritual progress." Amba Valaytan, 47, a bar manager at the famous St. Gã©ran Hotel remarks, "In temples now, many devotees sit down to absorb the shakti after the puja. This practice was not known before Gurudeva came."

Mougam Pareatumbee, 40, a retired hotel chef, now manager of his own catering center, remembers how life was hard during the early days of his marriage when his wife's health seemed unfavorable for childbirth. One day he declared, Gurudeva called from Hawaii and said, "I am with you. Don't worry!" Soon his wife, Amutha, gave birth to two beautiful daughters with no complications. S. K. Moorghen, who handles the accounting for several large businesses, remembers that although prior to Gurudeva's arrival in Mauritius

the importance of the home shrine was not fully understood, "Now, even nonfollowers of Gurudeva make it a must to keep shrines in their homes, and they are proud of it."

Swami Pranavananda Saraswathi, head of the Chinmaya Mission for Mauritius and Reunion Island, confided, "Gurudeva is a great soul who teaches Sanatana Dharma in a systematic way. By using the English language as the main teaching medium, he has brought this knowledge into the technological age in an unprecedented manner."

Politicians like Anil Baichoo, Minister of Transport, say that Gurudeva's teachings in Mauritius have helped to harmonize the various ethnic groups of the island. "Gurudeva's approach to Hinduism is not based on ethnicity or language," says Anil insightfully. "This has helped to build up more Hindu solidarity between Hindus of both North Indian and South Indian origin. Also, conversion is no longer a problem in Mauritius. This is due to the influence of Gurudeva and the Sai Baba groups."

"Gurudeva has indeed helped many Hindu leaders to understand that it is a waste of time and energy to discuss religious differences within the Hindu

community," states Mrs. Shoba Balgobin, manager of the renowned Eden College with 3,000 students. "Our youth are very motivated today and they think in terms of oneness within Hinduism. We need to stand united against all types of negative Western influences which are already undermining our beliefs."

Raj Putten, Deputy Speaker of the Mauritius Parliament, who knew Gurudeva for many years, says, "Today, as a result of Gurudeva's influence, I command the respect of the House through justice, equality, consensus and protection. Gurudeva's books will remain eternal treasures that will change the world in many ways into the next century."

In the mid-1990s, Gurudeva was shocked to learn that many his devotees, were using corporal punishment on their children. He was surprised and not a little hurt by this revelation, and immediately demanded a change. Not only did he require members to repent and do penance for hitting their children, but to hold classes in the community on "Positive Discipline." This system by Dr. Jane Nelson teaches that children should be raised with encouragement, love and respect rather than blame, shame and pain. Manon Mardemootoo, a long-standing devotee of Gurudeva and a prominent attorney, was among the many on the island who wholeheartedly undertook this mission. He said, "To

take these teachings of ahimsa into the public and make them a living reality is the present sadhana of Gurudeva's devotees here in Mauritius."

Gurudeva will also be remembered for his participation in two significant meetings promoting community harmony. First, he met with Hindu leaders to strengthen the ties within the Hindu community. Then, under the auspices of the Municipal Council of Port Louis, he met with religious leaders of all faiths to strengthen the bonds of friendship, respect and harmony among all the people of Mauritius. Today, in significant part because of Subramuniaswami's contribution, Mauritius is cited everywhere, including on the floor of the United Nations, as an example of peaceful coexistence in a multi-racial, multi-religious nation.