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YOUTH

Hindu Girl's Retreat

Week-long study program explores a woman's path in the modern world

In late December, 2000, 13 young devotees of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniya, publisher of Hinduism Today, gathered at his invitation near his island ashram on Kauai, Hawaii, for a first-ever all-girls retreat for Hindu studies overseen by family devotees and taught his senior swamis. The ashram had previously conducted coed retreats, but was aware of studies in education showing the value of all-girl programs. This successful retreat can be a model for other ashrams and temples in the West. Hinduism Today asked Neesha Alahan, 21, an American-born Hindu and recent graduate of Kalakshetra School in Chennai, India, in bharata natyam dance, to write this report.

BY NEESHA ALAHAN, KAUAI, HAWAII

While Gurudeva was in Singapore last year, he suggested that there should be a retreat

just for the Hindu girls and young women, rather than the usual coed youth camps. He felt that the girls had a great deal on their minds and that they should be able to talk about their troubles and the pressures that they were feeling about school, marriage, boyfriends and anything else that happened to concern them. This set in motion our Young Women's Retreat held from December 26 to January 1, 2001.

There were many brainstorming sessions and e-mail messages to explore appropriate topics for classes and discussions. Gurudeva's swamis assigned to the retreat said they hoped the girls would become more secure, more inspired to have a regular sadhana routine, and find a way to live in the world and be happy, but still follow dharma. We spoke with our mothers and other Hindu women. We wondered what was missing in the lives of women. Why it was degrading to be called a "housewife," when by Hindu

understanding that was a noble dharma for a woman? We talked about finding ways that rules of culture could be implemented with love rather than fear or pressure from elders and each other, and how to find a happy medium between two conflicting cultures without losing our morals.

The young women who had been born into our Hindu community in the West had lived through and watched the evolution of their parents from Western culture to Eastern refinement. The process had not been completely painless for any. The girls faced many new experiences as they grew older. They feared that they would be pressured to be "good Hindu women, wives and mothers"--translated by many young girls as "mindless baby machines"--and receive more grilling in "how they should improve themselves." Many were glad that there weren't going to be any boys attending; it would be a chance just to hang out with the

girls, and it might be easier to concentrate.

From Malaysia came Gowrie Sivanesan, 19, Nalakini Niranjana, 30, and Abhirani Raman, 21; from California, Meenakshi Palani, 19, Shivani Rajan, 17, Darshani Alahan, 15, Pundarika Kandiah, 12, and Devika Ajaya, 18; and from Singapore, Anusha Sanmugam, 16. They joined the Kauai residents--myself, 21, my sisters Sitara, 15, and Priya, 12, and our neighbor, Selvi Katir, 14. Some of us had never met, others were old friends.

As the retreat began, the swamis told us that they hoped that we all enjoy ourselves, relax, reflect. They suggested we think of this camp like being in a space station, far from home and free of daily pressures, and that we should take this opportunity to reflect on our lives and hopefully gain some useful perspectives. The first event would be 6:00 am fire homa at the temple. We were told to

get to bed early, but.... Boy, 4:30 am came early after that late night. Everyone was awakened by the smell of incense and the sounds of some vigorous drum music. We all gathered to have a quick guru arati and then hopped in the two vans driven by two of the aunties to the temple. For some of the girls, this was the first time that they had ever been to the Kadavul Hindu Temple. All felt the power radiating from Siva's sanctum with the sound of the swamis chanting Sri Rudram and the crackle of the homa.

During the day, we began classes with the swamis on philosophy, yoga, worship and more. A big purpose of the retreat was to discuss our issues, so the swamis asked us to spell them out, starting with what we most feared. We all agreed that we feared not being accepted by people who were not Hindus. We examined why that would be. Many said it was because we dress in traditional South Indian clothing--a custom of

Gurudeva's devotees whether in East or West--which can look odd to people in the West. A few girls argued that it didn't matter what we wore, that what matters is inside, and that people should accept us as we are. Another said you are a Hindu in your heart, not because of your clothes.

The discussions branched out into many other subjects, like pressure from peers and elders of the community who always criticize the youth and put them down, making them rebel even more. We wondered why they can't just tell us that they love us and give us a chance to breathe, why they can't trust us to use the knowledge and principles they taught us? We discovered that nearly everyone has similar problems, no matter where they are from. It was good to talk.

We made several excursions during the week, the first by boat up the nearby Wailua River

to a lush forest and beautiful waterfall where we meditated. We went to the beach for sunrise--arriving the first time two hours early! On another day we visited the gracious mayor of Kauai, Maryanne Kusaka, and then went on to Waimea Canyon and spectacular views of the Napali Coast--proving Kauai is one of the most beautiful places on Earth.

We shared our feelings openly with the swamis about how the pressures the adults feel when living in a strict community manifest in pressure on their children. This only makes resentment and frustration among the youth. We talked about how traditions are just wisdom that should be used to lead a good life and to protect us from harm. The swamis told us that just because we are strict, does not mean we have to be somber. They told us that Gurudeva does not believe in blind obedience and that we should not just follow unhappily and without thinking for ourselves. He told us

that Gurudeva is open to creativity, especially when it comes to dress. We asked if we could have careers before marriage, if we would quit when we were married. Gurudeva said yes, that it was like a career change to full-time mother and wife.

We had classes on the meaning of puja, on understanding prana, meditation (including by ourselves in a cave!), hatha yoga, manipuri dance and the impact of different kinds of music on the emotional body. A special event was arranged for us with the psychic Arthur Pacheco, who communicates with people in the next world. This was an astounding and eye-opening demonstration for us. Among many things, he told us while in trance that it was quite ridiculous to cry and mourn over people who die and that we would do better to wish them well on their continuing journey. He said women should speak from their hearts more, even though they might be hurt, because things were in

an imbalance. Women needed to come out and help make peace.

Toward the end of the retreat, the swamis asked us if we had other concerns to get out in the open. All the girls felt that things were pretty much solved. We didn't want to rewrite the rules, just alter the wording a bit. They told us that rules of culture only seem hard when you don't want to do something. They said that we should follow our hearts, do what makes us

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After the camp, I asked the swamis for their observations. They felt the key to success was finding out what the youth want so that all their needs and wants were covered. They thought that seven days was just long enough so that the ice was broken, and short enough so that no one got burnt out. They hoped that the girls were looking inside themselves and thinking that maybe all things religious aren't so confining and serious, and that sadhana (regular spiritual disciplines) could only help make their lives easier. They felt it was good the adults remained in the background as it gave the youth a chance to breath and share their thoughts without fear.

In retrospect, all had a wonderful time and eagerly look forward to the next retreat. They felt uplifted, calmer and more steady. Meenakshi said she had recharged herself and had time to reflect. Shivani said she felt

more settled emotionally and had some practical tools to help her in the hard parts of life. Nalakini said, "The swamis listened, and I think they understood us more than we understood ourselves. Gurudeva brought us closer to our spiritual self in that one week than we could have ever done on our own in many a lifetime." Abhirani said, "The swamis are very open-minded, friendly, outspoken, humble, informative and humorous. We shared ideas, opinions, consequences and suggested some solutions to overcome the unwanted problems that we have been facing. It was all really a precious gift to me from Gurudeva." They came away from a camp feeling good about themselves, because no one criticized them. All of them were glad that it was only for girls, because normally the attention was on the boys—so, Mission Accomplished!