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EDUCATION

Thinking Different

T.S. Rukmani holds the first chair of Hindu studies in North America

Dr. T. S. Rukmani took a master's degree in Sanskrit in 1954 at the request of her father, a politician and freedom fighter. Four years later she was the first woman and only the second person to earn a PhD in Sanskrit from Delhi University. She then embarked upon a distinguished academic career. For the first 30 years she taught at Delhi University, and then, upon the retirement of her husband from the Indian Air Force, was appointed to the first Hindu Chair in the world, at the University of Durban in South Africa. In 1996, she headed to Montreal, Canada, to take up the first Chair of Hindu Studies ever created in North America, at Montreal's renowned Concordia University. She's a popular teacher both at the university and at local Hindu temples where she conducts periodic seminars. In November, 1999, as part of a project on the state of sannyas, Hindu monasticism, in the present era, she visited Hinduism Today's offices on Kauai. We interviewed her on a range of subjects.

On the Hindu chair

The principle mandate is to teach courses in Hinduism. I give three courses and am engaged in a lot of research. The university has generously allowed me time to teach voluntarily

in the Hindu community as well. The object there is to educate the diaspora community on Hinduism through conferences, visiting lecturers and classes. Fifty percent of the students in my university classes are Hindus. At the beginning of the year they don't admit to the class being their first opportunity to learn about Hinduism, but by the end of the year they invariably say it was an eye opener. They appreciate learning from someone from India who is inside the tradition.

Her community work

I am basically concentrating on teaching Advaita Vedanta with the community classes because there is a lot of demand for learning about the Bhagavad Gita and Shankara's Advaita Vedanta. These are adult students, working people, so I have it from six to eight in the evening. They are asked a lot of questions about Hinduism by the community, and now they are learning answers. There are two temples in Montreal, the Hindu Mission and the Hindu Mandir, which encourage academic meetings, which is a second way I teach in the community. We just had one with two hundred participants at the time of Diwali on the spiritual disciplines in Hinduism. We recently invited Dr. Subash Kak from the USA to lecture on the Saraswati civilization, and more than 350 people attended. Part of our aim is to get the community to know the people who are involved in Hindu issues.

On caste

We talk about caste all the time. I explain that caste is, first of all, bad; second, it does not constitutionally exist; and, three, you can be prosecuted in India if you even mention caste by name. But then the reality is very different than the law. Attitudes have not changed, you do get a lot of

caste-based violence. I go back to the origin, to the Rig Veda, the Tenth Mandala, which explains the concept of the Cosmic Body. I tell my students, "Look here, the body cannot function without the head, the shoulders, the thighs or the feet and each one of them is associated with a Deity. The Rig Vedic deities are not superior and inferior, there is a kind of democracy of Deities." So I tell them it's a kind of holistic concept where at that period in time, the structure of society was conceived in a practical manner. What happened later was an abuse of the system, and that's it. So they slowly understand and are able to then separate the theory from the practice.

On dharma

Dharma became a big issue in a discussion when one man came and said, "Look, in my house my wife says this and my mother says that, now which is my dharma? I don't know what to do." You see dharma is very easy to define otherwise, but when you are in a practical situation of wifely dharma how do you interpret it? It's not easy, but we try to discuss it. That's how I approach the topic of Hinduism.

Corporal punishment

My sister is a strict disciplinarian, but I would never, ever punish my children. I'm totally against corporal punishment because I feel it's possible to teach children through love rather than through punishment, speaking gently, ruling by love rather than fear. You must bring children up in a proper atmosphere, and you yourself must be engaged in proper activities. We have a lot of classical music at home, we take our children to dances, to good academic sessions. My husband would take them to the temple. Our son went for sitar

classes, our daughter for classical dance. So I think the parents themselves don't do what is necessary and then naturally children have problems. The mistake is somewhere else, it is not in the children. Childrearing is difficult, and I will not discount anyone's circumstances. Every parent wants to bring up the child in the best way he or she can. But it is easy for us to talk like this because we were brought up by enlightened parents. But what about workers? They approach this much differently than someone from a university profession.

On interfaith groups

I think interfaith meetings make an impact on people who have not heard about our Hindu religion at all. I remember one meeting attended by the mayor of Montreal. I talked about the Upanishads, and he said "Such amazing, wonderful thoughts they have." At least people of other religions learn that very early on Hinduism had these wonderful character-building virtues. But of course, there is a long way to go for religious understanding or even appreciation. The pope, for example, has not even acknowledged that all religions are equal. We don't want a Christian to become a Hindu, but we do want consideration for all religions.

Montreal's Hindus

One of my friends said, "Why are we building so many temples? There may not be young people to come and worship later on." But then others say the temple was built because young people want to know, and the young people are involved in the temple. Myself, I'm optimistic. Maybe only twenty percent will find the religion important for them and their children, and from there it will build up. I don't think it will die out. I think it will grow up as a Canadian Hinduism, as has

grown up a Mauritian Hinduism, South African Hinduism, Sri Lankan Hinduism, etc. There will be changes, like all men wearing pants and shirts. The temple is associated with retaining one's culture. In a place like Canada walking in the snow in a sari is really tough. I'm still doing it, but a lot of my friends gave up, including our daughter and daughter-in-law. But we don't blame them, because it is tough. But when they come to the temple, I find they all wear Indian dress, either a sari or salwar kameez. Even the young girls do that. They will eat only vegetarian food inside the temple. So to a certain extent the temple is becoming a center of retaining most of what Hinduism stands for.

On her sanayas project

I admire sannyasins. I think they have done a great deal to maintain the spiritual tradition. Now I'm doing interviews for the project. That's why I'm interviewing your Gurudeva. I will examine the ancient texts on sannyas, then see how the tradition has changed over time. Sannyas has been there for ages. Until Swami Vivekananda came out and the Western Swami came into being there was one kind of image that was associated with the sannyasin. That image is changing, and it has to change with globalization and communication and technology. So my project is to find what has changed, and if it has changed for the better, and things like that. The sannyasin ashrama has come to the West and revealed one of the greatest strengths of Hinduism. The sannyasin monk here is not like the Catholic monk. People say, "Oh, we also have the monastic tradition." But monks like the Trappists live separately, they don't have this kind of intimate relationship of the sannyasin who comes into the community, sits with the community, acts more like a counselor. The sannyasin in the Indian tradition is an approachable person, an image I don't

see in the Catholic tradition. I feel the sannyasins have maintained the religious tradition, maintained the dharma, which means maintaining the cohesiveness of society.

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