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VAISHNAVISM

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Vallabhacharya leader Indira Bettiji Goswami tours America and Europe

Lavina Melwani, New York

lassiwithlavina.com

When I was very small, I felt this strong attachment to Krishna--it must be from a past life," says Indira Bettiji Goswami, known affectionately as "Jiji" to her followers. "I used to love the sound of His flute and the sight of His image. From childhood, I used to believe that Krishna was my best friend." A modern-day Mirabai (the 15th-century woman saint devoted to Krishna), Jiji, 58, has spread the name of the Blue-Hued God through composed poems, songs and writings, in homes to a few and on stage to thousands, through good works and compassion for humanity. A scholar of nondualism, she has written several excellent books. She has written commentaries on the Vedic scriptures and is fluent in Sanskrit, Hindi and several regional languages.

Jiji's organized, multi-day programs are part discourse, part concert, part drama--and all devotion. At the Norwalk Hindu Temple in New Jersey, USA, she led the packed crowd in her song, "We are all Hindu!" That refrain was loudly chanted after

verses such as: "Unfurl the saffron flag of Hinduism; Increase the respect for the Vedas; Embrace the Eternal Religion; Extend the hand of friendship; Expand the respect of Hindu culture." A week before in Tampa, Florida, she conducted a nine-day program of discourses, rated as "the best program I've seen" by Tampa resident P.D. Patel. The audience especially loved the staged reenactment of Krishna's birth on one night and of His marriage to Rukmani on another, reports Nitish Rele.

Jiji has traveled tirelessly through the world, sitting with Hindus in Bahrain, New York and Germany, touching the lives of millions (devotees say 30 million), awakening them to the greatness of their Hindu Dharma and showing them new ways to keep their faith strong.

Consider, for example, the transformation of Raman Bhai Patel, a retired contractor and motel owner in Maryland, USA. When he met Jiji in 1982 in Washington, D.C., he was eating meat, smoking and paying scant attention to religion, even though he came from a devout Vaishnava family. "Jiji changed all that," he recounts. "She said, 'Raman Bhai, your first duty is to do seva (religious service).' I objected that I was unworthy, unknowledgeable, too busy and could not manage with the children around. 'You just keep clean the area where the Deity is kept in your home, only five minutes a day.' Jiji said, 'God is going to teach you how to do seva Himself. You simply begin with sincere desire and effort.' At first I did just five minutes, but today it has become two hours of daily seva and singing songs. I began to think: I live in a big, roomy house and my God lives in a tiny corner shrine. So I turned my two-car garage into a beautiful temple room, and have had lots of

gatherings there ever since. Jiji has had a dramatic effect on my life and a unifying effect in the Indian community. One day I saw in my spiritual vision that Jiji is Goddess Yamanuji [the sacred river]. Now I understand that thousands of people have this same vision."

Once, in Bangalore, a disciple was seated on the floor near Jiji's bed while she rested. The disciple was chanting japa in her mind, and Jiji appeared to be sleeping. The disciple stopped her japa, and Jiji suddenly said, "Oh, don't stop chanting, it's nice!" Jiji was listening to the mental japa of her disciple, although no audible sound was made.

Early life: Destiny, not choice, is the genesis and power of Jiji's mission. She is a direct descendent of Vallabhacharya Mahaprabhu, the great 15th-century Vaishnava saint, and is in the 14th generation of his family. The Vallabha Sampradaya (tradition) is one of the six great modern schools of the Vaishnava branch of Hinduism.

Born in Surat (north of Mumbai), Jiji was surrounded by the words and deeds of Krishna from birth. Her grandfather was the Acharya of the 6th seat of the Vallabha Sampradaya and gave her religious training from childhood. Yet, while her siblings married and got involved in the routines of worldly life, Jiji chose to follow the spiritual path and felt no attraction for marriage. She says, "From childhood, I knew this was my destiny, my road. A well-known astrologer confirmed this to my father, 'If she were to marry, she would not live the worldly life.' So I was allowed to remain unmarried and pursue a spiritual education." She studied at home the Vedas,

Upanishads and other scriptures under a scholar, Nagar Das Bambania. Later she attended Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda, receiving an M.A. in Sanskrit. She learned from many gurus, most especially Sri Nara Hari Maharaj.

In her youth, spiritual teaching became entwined with social welfare, a mix which remains today. "When I was a young girl, there was a devastating drought in Gujarat, and people were starving. This inspired me to work for the poor people," she told Hinduism Today. Later she visited Champaranya, the birthplace of Sri Vallabhacharya. "There I saw a poor old village woman fall down, with blood coming from her eyes. I took her to a doctor, who told me the village people were becoming blind from malnutrition." Jiji decided then and there that "One should merge religion and society--one should reform society and also do the work of Sanatana Hindu Dharma. Religion without humanity is lame, and humanity without religion is blind."

She began preaching from the age of 12, and commenced her social work at 16. In 1980 she visited the UK and in 1985 the USA. In 1981 she founded the Anugraha Charitable Trust which provides for the needs of people struck by natural calamities, offering food, medicine, clothing and shelter. In 1992, after the earthquake in Maharashtra, Jiji saw to the physical and spiritual healing of the victims of Latur. She also opened a school and program for adopting children who had lost their parents in the earthquake. She has established free medical and dental clinics throughout India.

Jiji's daily life revolves around her seva, devotional service and

worship, for Sri Nathji. No matter where she is traveling in the world, or how busy her schedule, Jiji's seva always comes first. From two hours before sunrise until eleven or twelve noon, anyone calling will be told politely, "Jiji is in seva, please call later or leave a message." Jiji bathes, dresses, garlands and ornaments her chitra swarup (picture form) of Sri Nathji, then does japa and devotional songs. Her seva goes on in spite of time zone changes, in spite of the fact she traveled a great distance by car, train or plane to give a lecture the night before and is leaving immediately the next day.

Afternoons, especially when in India, are often spent on the endless details of her various temple and charity projects worldwide. Nearly every evening has a program for her to attend. These often last late into the night, as many people line up to see her, express their appreciation for her lecture, ask her blessings, express their anguish over a wayward family member, or request about initiation into the seva of Sri Nathji.

American ministry: In 1992, Jiji founded H.E.L.P. (Human Enrichment through Love and Peace), which is based in Edison, New Jersey. Indeed, the US is an important part of her ministry. Since 1985, she has visited cities in America and has over 100,000 devotees there, mainly from the Gujarati community. Through a decade of visits, she has cogent insights into the Hindu community in America which she shared with Hinduism Today.

In Hindu families in America, Jiji has seen again and again, "The father and mother are very involved in making money and working. Then they have such a social life, with so many

parties, that I see very little scope for religious work. Even if they come to the temple, they spare very little time for religion."

Regarding the high rate of mixed marriages in the US, Jiji says, "It is fine if the American spouse turns Hindu. But if there are two faiths in the same house, there will be problems. If children are brought up in two faiths, there will be confusion for them. The way of life and culture is different. As it is, children know Hinduism very little, since they go to public schools or Christian private schools. I think now we have enough temples and should build schools which not only teach religion but also all subjects, like the Jewish and Catholic schools. We should teach what is best in our religion along with world religions and the curriculum of regular schools, with sports and other activities. The children don't take that much interest in participating in temple classes because these teach only religion and language."

Jiji, unlike many Hindu teachers, does not believe that all Western influences are harmful: "Everything Western is not bad. The work ethic and technology is good, but the impact of television programming is bad and all these programs are shown in India."

Jiji is outspoken on the situation of Hindus in India. Asked for her reaction to the government take-over of the famous Vaishno Devi and Tirupati temples, she said, "This is not a good thing, for the very culture of the temple will be destroyed. The government servants are not spiritual. If they run the temple, it'll be just another routine work. She adds,

"The government would not do that to any Muslim organization, so why do they do that to Hindus? All these special categories and reservations are going to destroy the society of India. Nowadays it's a sin to be a brahmin. It is now fifty years since Independence--that's a long time to give special rights to minorities."

The Vallabhacharya Sampradaya [see page 32-36] has been a major influence on Indian art. Jiji explains, "Sri Vallabhacharya wanted human life to be one with God through worship. He wanted human beings to consecrate all their talents to God. Not only art but singing, dancing and food should be consecrated to God." In this way, everything from the making of God's clothes to the painting of His images, to the cooking of His prasad (sacred food) to singing His praises becomes an act of devotion and love. Says Jiji, "We do not regard the statue as separate from God, because God is in it, too."

Her warning: "Slowly and gradually the whole Indian way is being demolished. The inner soul of Hinduism is being covered by the ignorance and darkness of this age. The Indian people are forgetting their glorious tradition, their culture, their religion, and it is a big problem for the children. For them, there must be a new approach. The media should be changed. Not only books, but also the use of projectors, videos, computer animation, pictures and small charts, everything available must be used to teach them about our tradition, our values and the glorious heritage of India. There must be comparative studies between science and religion. We can use the theory of education, child psychology, personality development programs, social integration etc.--but all based in our own Hindu Sanatana Dharma. This is urgently needed to

counteract the huge wave of materialism and to save the situation."

And so this traveling descendent of Sri Vallabhacharya traverses the globe, spreading the joy of Lord Krishna and the power of Hinduism to the many Hindus settled in countries across the world. She takes long trips and preaches for no other reward than the sound of the magical flute which she has been hearing since childhood.

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