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"Rope!" a husky voice shouts in warning. Somewhere in the obsidian night sky overhead a nylon rope is invisibly whizzing through the air toward us. Coils of rope hit the ground with a soft thud. Like a cowboy bulldogging a steer, an agile monk grabs it and in twenty seconds cinches down a row of ten bee hives on the flatbed of a two-ton truck. He loops the rope and deftly sends it whistling over the next row of hives to the other side of truck, shouting "rope." It's a necessary warning - getting hit by the rope's butt end is like being on the wrong side of Indiana Jones' bullwhip. It hurts far worse than a bee sting.

With disoriented bees crawling on the lenses of flashlights, casting giant insectile shadows, several teams of Hindu monks are carrying 150-pound bee hives - their entrances sealed - to the truck. Inside each hive about 60-90,000 bees and their single queen/mother are jostled and angry. Normally gentle, they are very defensive at night and we are moving them to a far distant location, the equivalent of picking up your entire house with all your relatives at the breakfast table and moving it to another state. Kauai, northernmost of the Hawaiian islands, is home to a major Saivite Hindu monastery that ran Hinduism's most unique endowment: a commercial-scale bee outfit of 3,000 hives. It's the second largest in Hawaii and one of the top twenty in the US.

We're high on a mountain plateau - our two trucks straining under a hundred hives covered by bright orange netting material. The view shoots straight out to an endless ocean glowing silver and magenta from early dawnlight. Our crew of eight monks, each buried under two bee suits with gloves taped to the sleeves, are thirstily slaking down cool water. The daily consumption of water is one gallon per person. We've been up since 2:15 in the morning, a good hour and a half before Kauai Aadheenam's (Saivite temple/monastery complex) other resident monks rustle from sleep for pre-dawn sadhana and meditation. Today, fourteen hours of work will be our worship. In the night blackness, gear is secured, the trucks are checked like a jet aircraft, lunches packed, a quick arati in the Siva Nataraja temple and a "be careful" blessing from our Sat Guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami. We drive down an empty highway, drinking coffee from thermoses, bhajan music on the tape

deck, headed to the desert-like side of Kauai. Night moves are tough on monks and bees alike, but it's the only way to make sure that the thousands of "field" bees - the ones that harvest honey nectar - are in the hive. As they navigate by the infrared light of the sun, when the last purple/greys of sunset come they are winging their way back to the hive at 25 m.p.h. And with a million antsy bees as our cargo, the dawn journey through the island's towns ensures empty streets and unalarmed people.

From our mountain perch we savor the ocean view before clambering into the trucks for the careful haul to the wet side of the island. We're looking northeastward in the general direction of Japan. There, in Tokyo, two of our brother monks are talking with men who are pulling together a financial package to purchase the monastery's apiary (bee farm). The effort is coordinated by an eclectic (former Hare Krishna temple president) Buddhist entrepreneur, Indy "Rishidas" Schneider, who is fluent in Japanese and Japan's complex business culture. The purchase involves 250 million bees in 3,000 hives scattered throughout Kauai's off-road terrain in sixty "bee yards." The hives are capable of producing 450,000 pounds of honey each year, enough to fill a hotel-size swimming pool. With the papers signed in June, Rishidas moved to Kauai to take over as the apiary's manager. The transition brought to a close a chapter of little-known Hindu history that began in 1972.

H.H. Gurudeva, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, first visited Hawaii in 1959, flying from San Francisco where he founded the first Hindu church - Saiva Siddhanta Church - in 1949. Like Mark Twain, he was instantly enamored of the islands' verdant, volcanic beauty and thick etherealness. On Gurudeva's second visit to Kauai in late 1969, through a lucky opportunity he was able to buy a rock-and-timber resort, a refuge of the 1950's well-to-do that had fallen on hard times. It was nestled on a sacred river in the foothill wrinkles of Kauai's mile-high volcano, Mt. Waialeale. In February, 1970, he brought over a staff of senior swamis and karma yogis and reincarnated "The Tropical Inn," as it was quaintly named, into a secluded monastery burrowed in eucalyptus trees, palms and ferns.

In the monastery's first two years, the closest any of the swamis or sadhaka monks got to a bee was when they stepped on one while walking through the grass to the swimming pool or temple. But bees were in reality zinging their way in flight paths constantly through the monastery airspace. In summer they would raid the Octopus tree, filling the air with a loud and comforting humming sound. In early fall, the eucalyptus trees' white puff-ball flowers became little space stations for tens of thousands of orbiting bees. Kauai is known as the "Garden Island," and the

"garden" was teeming with nature's greatest pollinators.

One day in late summer of 1972, Gurudeva unexpectedly announced to the monastery that we were to learn beekeeping. Beekeeping is a skill/an practiced by contemplatives since the days of dynastic Egypt. Aristotle was an avid beekeeper. The monks were laboring long hours in carpentry, overseeing a far-flung publishing enterprise and administrating the Church and its educational institutions. Goats and cows were kept and a garden established, but beekeeping was a real monkish hobby.

So as hundreds of inepts who aspire to beekeeping do every summer, a couple of monks sat down at a table and rifled through a Sears & Roebuck catalogue for bee suits, helmets, veils, smokers (canisters in which to burn smoke-producing fuel) and the wooden hive bodies. We located some beekeeping books. The white suits and shiny, metal smokers and pine-smelling boxes arrived. We knew from pictures in the books the difference between the queen - built like a missile with wings, capable of laying 2,000 eggs a day - and the female workers who do all the work and comprise the colony's huge population, and the male drones who are lazy, honey-consuming burns whose sole function is to mate with the virgin queen while in flight, an acrobatic act that requires stupendous vision. The drones are endowed with huge eyes stuck on a fuzzy W.C. Fields body. The poor guys die after the mating and when the winter season onsets, they're ruthlessly booted out of the hive. We always felt sympathy for the drones.

All we needed now was bees. You can order package bees and a queen to start a hive from suppliers. But we knew that Kauai in the early 1900's had supported a beekeeping operation of 2,000 colonies. When it faded away, those colonies had gone wild. Estimates stated that Kauai now had 5,000 wild colonies. Gurudeva told the monks, "All you have to do is go out and catch a couple of those wild colonies."

To track down a wild hive, you have to follow the flight path of its harvesting bees, a continuous two-directional flying route that can cover up to five miles distance from the hive. You also have to drag along a box with frames to put the captured bees, queen and brood/honey comb in. Our brave monks, sweating rivers inside their suits on a sopping hot day, successfully scouted a bee flight corridor and took off into the scrub thickets like a herd of elephants, splashing through streams, falling on their faces, praying to Lord Ganesha, trying to keep the silvery wings of the bees within sight. At the day's end they returned triumphant, exhausted, stung

badly by their first real encounter with wild bees, but grinning through swollen cheeks with pride. Pictures were taken. The thick, dark honey was sampled. Everybody excitedly watched hundreds of bees coming out to the entrance porch of the hive body, sticking their tails in the air and rapidly fanning their wings. It created a noticeable breeze and delicious sound. It was like tapping into the secret code of nature. We would learn later that the bees dispersed a chemical scent during the fanning that indicated this was their new home. This first encounter with live bees was such a delight that we ordered an extra-large size bee suit for our 6'3" Gurudeva. In the Upanishads, there is recorded a delightful passage known as the "Honey Doctrine," which describes stages of yogic awareness in terms of honey-like sweetness. Surely, some rishis constructed their Himalayan forest ashrams in the humming vicinity of a hive. Bees have been the silent teachers of many philosophers.

Within several years, the monastery staff had matured from bungling bee-havers - those who have a couple of colonies - to knowledgeable beekeepers who could tend large numbers of hives, including mastering the art of splitting a single hive into two or more, dealing with deadly bee diseases that could swiftly wipe out the entire apiary, fighting off bufo toads that were eating horrifying numbers of bees, building and repairing equipment and tuning into Kauai's shifting flower seasons. The colony count was vastly increased through splitting and buying other beekeeper's hives. "Bee yards," where 20-80 hives are arranged in a horse-shoe shape for truck access, were located in outlying pastures, woods and desert dunes far from the monastery.

Beekeeping, for the Saiva monks, was more than learning the basics of equipment and bee society. It was a test in dealing with fear and a challenge to learn how to project a friendly aura and gracefully move around the bee colony. In our first ten years of beekeeping, the bees predominately came from DNA stock that was very defensive. This can create a mean, aggressive hive. In inspecting, harvesting or splitting a hive, the beekeeper is working down into its densest population area. Smoke, which signals fire to the bees, pacifies them as they suck up honey in case the colony has to abandon the hive. But despite liberal belching of smoke, mean hives explode like a grenade when manipulated and within two seconds the novice monk beekeeper is enveloped by thousands of bees trying to sting him and exuding a banana-smelling chemical scent that signals "attack." Whole yards can be churned into giant clouds of attacking bees if there are enough mean hives that are mishandled or even if dark clouds roll in blotting out the sun. The smart bees go for places on the suit where the fabric is wet or creased close to the skin. They crawl into the veil that protects the face and madly try to enter air holes in the sun helmets.

It takes tremendous presence of mind not to panic and rip off the veil - which some monks did - or to start swiping at the bees which just makes them madder. In some of our worst cases, even experienced beekeeper monks sustained over 150 stings and would start reeling and seeing purple skies. Gradually, the monk conquered the fear and could fuse his mind with each hive handled, treating it like a supernatural being. A kind aura and thoughts were projected and graceful, non-jerky movements were mastered that blended into the natural motion of the bees themselves. The monk and hive became one. Its incredibly beautiful inner workings became obvious: the bee dance which instructs other foraging bees exactly where to go for the best flower sources; the queen laying eggs while her "court" of bee-maidens cleaned and fed her; the hatching of powdery baby bees who have no inkling what's going on in this city of 90,000 bees.

Besides the monk's skill in handling a colony, the monastery beekeepers put great time and effort into improving the genetics of the operation, a painstaking process done solely through the queen mother to produce a gentle but productive hive. We were largely successful in this and were able to work millions of bees a day in short sleeve shirts - rarely getting stung. By 1979, the bee operation had been officially established as an endowment for the monastery, the traditional agricultural means of ensuring a Hindu monastery's maintenance into the future.

By 1985, Kauai Aadheenam had split and acquired 2,000 hives and was operating a huge honey-extracting plant with stainless steel processing equipment, forklifts and mountains of bee hive boxes. Tons of butter-rich honey were going off-island to Hawaii's commercial bakers. By 1987, the apiary had swollen to 3,000 hives, an incredibly rapid build-up. In fact, in sixteen years the monks had succeeded in resuscitating the near-dead bee business on Kauai (which had fallen to 300 colonies) and pumped it up to a new level in both quantity and professional quality. A lab analysis showed Kauai's special blends of honey as remarkably mineral dense.

In lockstep with the creation of the apiary endowment in 1979, Gurudeva launched the then fledgling newspaper Hinduism Today as the flagship of Himalayan Academy Publications. The apiary and newspaper grew like twins, and monks most responsible for the publications were also the core personnel of the apiary, a tug-of-war between extreme physical and mental service. In early 1988, as the apiary hit 3,000 colonies, which demand ceaseless daily toil, Hinduism Today also accelerated into heavy demand with franchise prospects opening up. Additionally, the publications department as a whole was launching new series of books, pamphlets and special art posters, each requiring highly skilled monks. As

Gurudeva surveyed the future, it became apparent that the intensive labor of the apiary was slowing down the publications, the arena the Church has always specialized in and perceived as vital to the future of Hinduism. The apiary went on the selling block. Amazingly, out of the blue stepped Rishidas Schneider who shepherded the purchase and became part-owner. The apiary remains in Buddhist/Hindu hands, its future bright as Hawaiian honey invades Asian and American markets. At Kauai Aadheenam, two busy hives are left. They stand in a grove where monks can sit and enjoy nature's most "bee-calming" society, remembering the lessons learned, reflecting on the selfless cooperation which bees possess and man seeks.