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J.P. Vaswani Fights to Instill More Caring, Less Apathy

Gidwani, Gulshan It is 6:00 AM, Poona, India. The black sky fades into a lustrous blue as fiery streaks of magenta strafe the horizon. The quiet street, empty only a few minutes ago, now fills with men and women, clad in white, approaching an alabaster building - the Sadhu Vaswani Ashram. They enter, Soft-spoken prayers and Sanskrit chants echo inside. Thirty minutes later, they reemerge to face a hot morning sun and scurry over to the Sadhu Vaswani Mission - a colossal, British relic - climb its winding staircase, enter a large room with gabled windows, find a place on the carpeted floor and sit in silence until "Dada" J.P. Vaswani, their guru, appears. Up long before the sun and meditating, he enters. He is medium height, slightly built with sculpted facial features and radiates kindness. He begins his daily upadesh: "Limitless is the universe. There still are discoveries to be made, beauty to be created, secrets to be probed. What part are you going to play in the ever-unfolding Cosmic Plan?" He is serious. He expects action. His devotees aren't jnana yogis, contemplating the epistemological riddles of the universe, musing whether God is the intrinsic or extrinsic support of matter. They are "servants" and all have a long day ahead - a hot one - of changing bed pans, plastering sores, feeding the hungry and teaching, teaching, teaching. Dada's morning message will be the coolest part of their day.

At 71, this Hindu leader is tendered every honorific available - rishi, saint, sage and His Holiness. His devotees acknowledge and accept them all. But he discards each of them, as a woodland deer rejects a spicy dish for the leaves of the forest. He might respond to being called "sadhu" and repeatedly insists: "I seek to be a servant of humanity. I love to think of the whole world as my country and to do good as my religion. I aspire to tread the path of humility and love. Love everyone, not only those that are 'good' but those whom the world regards as 'evil.' Love not only men but all creatures who breathe the breath of life." If this sounds like the well-coddled verse of a sweet-tongued, philanthropic ruminant, you would do well to meet the man. He'll look you in the eye and, before parting, ask you what he can do for you and then stand waiting until you fulfill his request. You see, where many glibly hail hallowed Vedic verse and then retire to their own human idiosyncrasy and tethered ways, this man actually applies the deepest Hindu teachings personally. And when he tells you, "God is love," he doesn't lay a long Sanskrit

verse on top of it to entertain your intellect or improve your erudition - or demonstrate his. He just stops and lets the thought resonate. He wears simple white dress but offers traditional reverence to the orange robe - artlessly kneeling to touch the feet of swamis half his age. And no one is too unimportant to secure his attention and affection. Once in Jamaica, Bahamas, he was delivered a bouquet of flowers from an unknown flower-maid. The next day he located her on a downtown sidewalk in her open-air "shop" and thanked her for the gift.

As Christians have their St. Francis of Assisi Hindus have a Dada. He is the animal kingdom's friend. Using some of the spiritual power that he likes to hide or feign he doesn't possess, he successfully forced two Indian states, Maharashtra and Karnataka to declare November 25th, "Meatless Day" and coerced Gujarat to ban slaughter and sale of meat on that day. "All life is sacred," he implores. "Appalling indeed are the sufferings we inflict on creatures whose helpers and guardians we all must be. I have seen God's image shining in birds and beasts and for me not to love them would be not to love the Lord." He eschews personal luxury as his hosts on the French Riviera learned when they offered him the master bedroom of their magnificent chateau only to find him contentedly asleep on the hard floor in the morning.

Teach Our Children to Give, Not Get

J.P. Vaswani was born on August 2, 1918, at Hyderabad. He was one of the youngest Indians to pass the B.Sc. Examination and went on to receive a Master of Science degree in physics from Bombay University. But thoughts of becoming a wealthy engineer soon dimmed and died in the magnetic presence of his uncle and guru, T. L. Vaswani - mystic, associate of Mahatma Gandhi, educationist and apostle of Indian culture. At his teacher's feet, Dada studied God and service to man. The institution that his uncle founded in 1930, the Sadhu Vaswani Mission, is empowered today by J.P. Vaswani with 29 missions worldwide, 14 outside India from Hongkong to Casablanca. Through three daily satsangs of kirtan, bhajan and discourse, mission members breathe in their teacher's vision, fortifying themselves to fulfill their daily chores - feeding the poor, teaching, running three charitable dispensaries with free medical aid, managing a hospital and publishing his 30 books. At their Shanti Seva Niketan, girls are taught skills such as cooking, tailoring and typing to equip them as independent wage-earners. Over 4,000 youth receive education at several of their Mira schools and one college.

Vaswani's Mira educational philosophy is simple and very Hindu - educate from the soul outward. Educating children to be doctors and engineers solely to amass wealth is soulless and uncaring, he believes. His students - though fine doctors and engineers they may become - learn first that the "end of knowledge is service." No servants cook their meals to save them precious minutes of study. The Mira saying goes, "Head, heart and hand." Learning to cook is important too. The students also serve the needy in the community so they learn that education should never become estranged from practical and intelligent application and should ever find its greatest bloom in uplifting others.

A 141-day world-tour in 1984 to Hindu communities in England, Spain, the USA, Canada and the Caribbean, broke open the Mission's India-centric vision as Dada realized his family was actually worldwide. True to his "giving is receiving" ideal, all monies given him during his travels were left in the communities they came from for their betterment. And he is one of only a few Hindu religious leaders who commands his devotees to set aside 10% of their income as the Lord's Share for use for selfless causes.

Though quiet and unassuming, his presence is demanded at major international Hindu-supported peace initiatives - at the United Nations, World Hindu Conferences, the House of Commons, England, and in April, 1988, at the Global Forum in Oxford. "Peace," he explains, "does not depend on governments. There could be no peace in the world as long as our own hearts were volcanos...If you would have peace, begin with [soulful education] of the child."

Spiritually educated children are his clearest vision to ensure a happier and healthier planet: "For the rejuvenation of the Hindu faith, three architects are needed: 1) the Seer, to give us the vision of freedom; 2) the Leader, who loves the poor and broken ones and 3) the Social Servant, whose program is education of the true type. Begin with the child, for the nation walks on the feet of the little ones." He shies from creed, dogma and rituals and keeps his message, like his words, direct, feather-light and fancy-free: "God is here. He is now. His feet are everywhere. They are in the poor, in brother birds and animals who are being slain by the million in our soulless cities. To serve them is to serve Him." Dada Vaswani's address: 10 Sadhu Vaswani Path, Pune, 411 001 India.