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Category : January 1990
Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 1990

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Ramoutar, Paras

His Mission Embraces Medicine, Art, Sculpture And a Temple in the Sea

Hinduism has always been alive and well in the East of Trinidad where great stars of religious inspiration customarily shine brightly. Yet now, there is an exuberant glimmer flickering at its center. Ravindranath Maharaj is the founder and pivotal force of the Hindu Prachar Kendra. Ravji, as he is affectionately knows, was born and bred in Caparo, Central Trinidad. For six years he has successfully etched his mark as a Hindu enthusiast, trying in his own modest way to rekindle the light of Hindu philosophy, practice and culture. His first ambition was simply to nourish some humble influence among the 300,000 Hindu within his own "mother Trinidad and Tobago." Yet, he believed that if this timeless message was properly couched in humility, passion, love and genuine concern it might eventually reach other parts of the Caribbean. He was right. The results of his service have surprised even him.

After completing his basic education, he taught at a Government School for five years. In the early part of 1972 he left Trinidad and traveled to India where he attended the Vishavaparishad of India to study Hinduism. He graduated with the title "Shastri." Here he also obtained the "First Degree" in Traditional Hindu Studies. At Kashmir Vidya Peetha he went on to earn his Master's Degree in Hindu Philosophy, and at Benares University he received his Ph.D, also in Hinduism.

After eleven years of study with only a few more requirements lacking for his doctorate, he returned to Trinidad in 1983 only to experience estrangement among his own people. "When I returned home I felt a sense of alienation. I experienced this in the course of my research for the doctorate. I travelled throughout the

country and met different people so that I could find my bearings in my own society," Ravji said.

In 1984, he started a series of camps and arranged lectures and tours in an effort to establish among the youth people a cadre of Hindu patrons and advocates. He also worked with a number of mandirs and temples including Ragoonanan road Satsangh Centre, Kelly Village, Balaram Krishna Temple, Penal Vishnu Temple, Rio Claro, Dow Village Hindu Mandir, Rambert Village, Piarco, Barrackpore, Longdenville and Thavenot Temple of Tacarigua. All of this bore fruits far beyond his expectation.

After his travels, he observed, that there were about 150 mandirs for the public and as many as 1,000 personal ones in Trinidad and Tobago.

Medical Services and Scholarships

From his meetings with rural people, Ravji was able to see the need for professional medical help. This ignited the formation of the Avatar Medical Academy which featured a assembly of specialists, including doctors and nurses, who willingly gave free medical assistance and drugs.

"[The Avatar Medical Academy] has worked very well, and there is a great demand for the service in many parts of our country," said Ravji. "Many people who could not have afforded medical bills got relief. This kind of encouragement [inspired me to establish] more national programs geared specifically for members of the Hindu community."

Ravji and the Hindu Prachar Kendra have also initiated an ancient Hindu custom called "Go-Daan." According to this custom, pandits perform pujas in the homes of needy Hindu and leave them with the gift of a cow as a symbol of Lord Krishna. So far, five cows have been given away.

These cows are given to the needy with the understanding that whenever a calf is born, it is donated to another needy family. We have three calves to be distributed now," explained Ravji.

Ravji has also been able to acquire a number of scholarships for young Hindus who have either returned or are about to return Trinidad and Tobago from India where they have studied such diverse subjects as Hindu sculpture, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Gita, the Shastras, Hindu arts and crafts. Two young Hindus are about to leave for Philadelphia, USA, on similar scholarships.

Kala Kutir Arts and Crafts

"We have initiated this field of studies (arts and crafts) so that people can come and learn. One of our graduates who has specialized in this field will be the tutor." He said.

Ravji is also encouraging the "Sangeet Mala," a program in which minstrels sing or chant 108 classical songs or bhajans. A number of these sessions have been held at various locations in North, South and Central Trinidad. To mark the 13th anniversary of Republicanism in this country, one such performance was given before a especially large and appreciative audience.

To celebrate Deepavali in October the Hindu Prachar Kendra collaborated with the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago to organize large public gatherings for bhajan, as well as to arrange visual displays of jhandis, mandirs and the like with the hope of providing "a real Hindu setting" in Trinidad. Extending their endeavors abroad, the Kendra is planning a photo exhibition and series of Sanseet Mala sessions for a number of US states including New York in the spring of 1990.

It is Ravji's hope that through such demonstrations more devotees will "be able to move closer to God inspired by these visual expressions." Ravji was the recipient of a Trinidad and Tobago National Award in 1988 for social and community work.

Refurbishing Sea Temple at Waterloo

In consort with the National Council of Indian Culture, the Kendra has embarked on the refurbishing of the 50-year-old, dilapidated Waterloo Hindu Temple in the sea.

A number of the temple's infrastructual pieces have been set in place beneath the ocean so that when the temple is built it will have the appearance of resting on the surface of the water. All indications are that the project will be competed within a reasonable length of time-thus providing the people of Trinidad and Tobago with their first Hindu Mandir in the sea.

In April 1987, Ravji helped to initiate "PradaKshina" which was a mass circumambulation of the entire island of Trinidad. Prime Minister A.N.R. Robinson and then Minister of External Affairs and International Trade Basdeo Panday as well as over 40,000 people from all over the island shared the enjoyment of this national event. It was actually a running marathon throughout the island, at no time during the six-day occasion were there less than 2,000 Hindus participating. People lined the routes and showered flowers on the runners. Swami Satchidananda, spiritual leader of the Divine Life Society of Carlsen Field, Chaguanas, started the race.

When the runners reached the city of Port-of-Spain, more than 10,000 lights were lit, bhajans were chanted and readings from the Ramayana and the Vedas were given at Woodford Square.

Ravji extolled the Hindu Prachar Kendra as the vehicle for the overall development of Hinduism in Trinidad and Tobago, particularly in giving it meaning for the young people. He said that the Kendra attempts "to evaluate the present, to learn from the past and to plan for the future." He further asserted that "Hindu Dharma, also called Sanatana Dharma, Arya Dharma, Manav Dharma, Vedic Dharma, holds out real possibilities for resolving the world trauma through peaceful co-existence, material prosperity, physical well-being, ecological management, spiritual life and universal brotherhood."

Ravji says that "Hindu Dharma has yet to fulfill its religious mission." He adds that it is not the intent of the Kendra to offer competition to other religious groups but rather to "educate, to teach, to inspire, to lead, to offer advice, to import knowledge on the great teachings, philosophy and thought of Hinduism."

Focusing on the future of Hinduism in Trinidad, Ravji stresses that Hinduism is not homocentric. He teaches that man is not the center of the universe, but is part of the total sum of the universe.

"Hinduism is at an important crossroads in its history. Much has been done, but there is still much more to be done in getting the spirit of Hinduism. Our Kendra is now poised to continue the work which we started. We have just received status as an official charitable organization according to the Charitable Act of Trinidad and Tobago," Says Ravji.

Address: Hindu Prachar Kendra, 9 Longdenville, Old Road, Enterprise, Chaguanas, Trinidad and Tobago.

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