Cutting Through Sectarian Barriers
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Trinidad's HSS Commands: "No Internal Hindu Enemies!"

Calypso capital of the Caribbean: turquoise ocean, white-sand beaches, black rum, black skin, steel drums, bongos, bananas and sugar cane shore to shore. If you're a tourist that's it. But if you're one of 250,000 Hindus, for whom this tiny island is home, there's another world - the world of three-day-long Ramayana performance, doll-house-size temples with island-made plaster-of-Paris murthis, spectacular bhajan groups, serious Lord Hanuman worship and a stockpile of stories of magic an divine healings that travel the coconut wireless, invigorating the folk/Hindu spirit like a local brew of celestial amrita.

Although mirth and merry is practically law in Trinidad, the Hindu community itself does face a stack of sobering problems: lack of leadership, religious ignorance, a diffident youth the those tenacious tentacles of tent-rally-style Christian evangelism. Determined to grab-hold of this problem list with somewhat of a "tough father" image is the Hindu Seva Sangh (HSS). It's "tough" because it demands action and it's a sort of a "father" because it wants the Hindu family united. President Deoroop Teemul explains, "Lack of unity here is a major problem; our Hindu organizations do not act in unison against common problems. Every Hindu [should be] brother and sister - no group an enemy. [So] we are non-sectarian; we supplement the work of other organizations rather than duplicate. In fact, we encourage our youth to become vibrant members of Ramayan group and other Hindu associations in their own villages."

Founded in 1983, HSS membership now tallies 1,000 and operates on a clear agenda: educate the youth into religious leaders; conduct weekly satsangs and

organize religious events; take care of the Hindu needy through distribution programs and conduct workshops whenever needed to tackle specific areas ranging from drug/alcohol abuse to family counseling.

Though its charity programs persist energetically year-round, this behind-the-scene service often goes unnoticed - visibly overshadowed by big youth meets that more dramatically identify the organization. Conspicuously copying an RSS blueprint (though officially non-aligned), military-like formation drills are standard at the year-round calendar of residence camps for boys and girls. But a mixed palette of culture, character-building and religion classes with a hefty does of sports and games leavens the rules and order tone. "I attended one of the youth training camps," shares 17-years-old Ramjitsingh. "It educated me about my religion and our way of life and has definitely been an incentive for me to be a proud Hindu."

In this HSS, no single religious leader, living or departed, commands an exalted position. They don't want this. President Teemul shares, "A review of almost all organizations developed around a central personality reveals collapse, stagnation and dissatisfaction after the personality leaves or dies. In our organization, irrespective of who is in the leadership, Hindu work will go on - this is the principle of Vyakti Nirpeksh. Highlighting a personality violates this ideal."

Though Christian evangelizing effectively cuts away at the flanks of the Hindu herd year after year - by winning only the weakest - Mr. Teemul admonishes Hindus to blame them-selves, not Christians: "Hindus here face a hostile environment; people want to convert them, change their cultural habits and makes them into something other than what they are. But the answer is not to remove the external pressure. Rather, it is to make Hindus strong, confident and knowledgeable about their faith and culture - united and able to help themselves." And according to Pandit Maharaj, general secretary of the Trinidad Academy, the HSS is doing the lion's share of this work: "I have done a survey of many Hindu organizations; the HSS is the real bulwark against Christian conversion."

Like any young organization, the HSS's "To Do" list is long, time is short and funds are never enough. But what money does come in, doesn't disappear into some vague "organizational overhead" vacuum. The HSS is volunteer - i.e. no salaries - and donations they get are spent judiciously and usually on the "other guy." For example, a recent donations finance sheet spreads a total of US $100,000 thusly:

$25,000 to three small temples; $52,000 for three heart and eye operations and $25,000 for housing construction, food and clothing gifts. "But the Sangh's main problem," Teemul shares, "lies in motivating its workers to efficiently handle the work it has committed itself to. Most of our workers are young people and as such most problems are inter-personal."

Tourists will keep coming to bake obliviously on Trindad's beaches; the Christian cross shows no sign of leaving and Western ways continue to invade by airplane and air-wave daily. But as sure as island drums are made from Texaco oil cans and coconuts fall from tropic palms, Trinidadian Hinduism - despite its quandaries - is ploughing ahead into the 21st century, charioteered by tough-minded, conscientious group like the Hindu Seva Sangh.

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