Touring Italy's Hideways of Hindu Influence
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The Vedic Values Course, Indian Art and Swami Bruno

Euphoria over the Eastern bloc's sea change to democracy has shown the world - via TV - bright, hopeful faces of European youth. There were dances of freedom, flowers changing hands, hammers and hands tearing down the Berlin Wall, and students grasping for meaning. But as Europe is high on the political rush, many of its youth are looking for their next drug fix or skirting the hormone - charged edges of violence.

In Milan, Italy, Antonio Craxi leans over and tells me, "It is our duty to collaborate in order to reduce and eventually defeat violence and drugs which are polluting the minds of young people." Craxi is a needle in Italy's moral compass that points to India, to human values that he says are the greatest gifts of the ancient Vedas to mankind. Craxi is a household name in Italy. His brother, Bettino, was the longest - serving Prime Minister in the volcanic politics of Italy. Antonio eases into his chair - his elegant and equally reflective wife, Sylvie, next to him - relating how his brother led the country into an important position in the European Community.

Antonio asserts his brother's success stems from human values. It is a known fact that both brothers have influenced each other intellectually and to some extent spiritually. Antonio and Sylvie Craxi spent the last ten years living in Southern India absorbing Hindu philosophy, practices and principles. Their four children are still there. The couple returned to Italy determined to seed a fresh awareness of ethics, values and mindfulness into as many young minds as possible - before or during the time they are susceptible to the allure of drug abuse, the option of crime or they just turn self - centered.

The seed they cast comes right out of Vedanta. "We are convinced that the Truth is in everyone," Craxi emphasizes. "What we can do at least is to evoke this realization in every possible manner. We have to stimulate it by teaching Vedanta values in the most simple and the most accessible way." But how to make Vedanta simple and accessible? In 1985, in the swirl of one of the busiest ashram centers in India, the Craxis worked together to carefully craft such a reduction of the Vedanta philosophy. It draws primarily on the Vedanta philosophy. It draws primarily on the teachings of one Indian guru who Antonio says "does not need any publicity and his name should remain anonymous." The Craxis incorporated children's literature such as the "Panchatantra" and asked well - known Italian illustrators to reinforce their messages into a more articulate visual language.

Their finished manuscript was fresh and youthful, but how accessible? They turned to the Old World concept of the traveling exhibition. The exhibition and book were both evocatively named, "Human Values: A journey from I to US." So far 80,000 Italian children have seen it in Milan and Trieste. And every day thousands more browse through the colorful displays in its current Venice location.

"The exhibition is principally targeted for children of primary and secondary schools," he clarifies, "but because of its universal message, older students and adults can equally derive great benefit from the visit...We are concerned to set up a protective fence against social evils."

Further, the "I to Us" exhibition is a tool to tap latent attitudes of the mind that youngsters would nor access in school, and perhaps not at home. Italy is at a crossroads of renewed material prosperity and of growing disinterest in organized religion. While 99% of the Italian population is Roman Catholic, the degree of actual practice is acutely low. Only 6% take communion on Sundays and less than 50% of the children receive catechism instruction.

Craxi's creation has drawn widespread criticism for bringing "weird" Indian values to Italy and trying to use official machinery to spread it. He retorts, "The message of human values is targeted towards children whose minds are not corrupted by careerism, cynicism and the western consumer values. Most of the teachers are used to one way of teaching children, the orthodox didactic way. They do not teach anything about morality, self - realization, the choice between right and wrong."

He feels his objective is fulfilled if the exhibition and book are understood by children. Because of the controversies and widespread interest that "I to Us" has generated, the Craxis have formed an organization called, "European Foundation for Human Values." It has already distributed over 100,000 copies of the book to educational organizations in Europe. The exhibition will soon tour through Europe.

Hindu Research in Romantic Venice

For centuries Indian civilization has exerted its influence on Italian noblemen. Walking Venice, I see traces of Indo - Venetian trade of the 14th century. Spices and objects de art topped the list. Professor Gian Giuseppe Filippi has spent his life sleuthing out the links between Italy and India. Fluent in Hindi, he's written books on Kabir, Mirabai, Hindu Bhakti and Venetian Indology. He teaches at the University of Venice, home of the largest Indology department in Europe. He has been the vice - president of the Italy - India Association since 1987. I met Dr. Filippi in the middle of a workshop for tourists who were going to India - and looking for enlightenment on her history and heritage. In our private talk he pointed out that Italy had natural intellectual leanings towards the Arab world for centuries. Only in the 19th century, in Turino, when Belloni acknowledged the power of the Indian civilization did the Italian scholars start taking an active interest.

In 1991, the biggest ever exhibition of Indian art will take place in the breath - taking 14th - century Doge's palace. This exhibition will show the best of 1,000 years of Indian history and art, assembled in India and shipped to Italy. More than 800,000 visitors come to Venice every month in the summer and undoubtedly this event will eclipse all other showings of Indian art to international tourists. Dr. Filippi, who is working on the logistics of the huge display, also told us that an Indian Museum will soon be established in Italy.

Country Ashram & a Gandhian in Milan

Outside of Venice, in the sun - washed countryside, I was taken to an amazing yoga ashram. It is the home of an Italian ascetic known as Swami Bruno who ten years ago adopted Siva as his personal deity, changing his name to Swami Sarvadananda. But the name "Swami Bruno" stuck. He was given a farm house and a plot of land by the local authorities. Some 300 young Italians regularly attend the

ashram to practice Sahaj Yoga and find refuge from worldly concerns or problems. The Swami, who normally doesn't allow the press in his ashram, granted an interview to HINDUISM TODAY. "For me, spirituality is not ask anybody to pay me for their relief. If they want to leave anything in the arati tray, it's up to them. I am not interested in curing people, but creating awareness of the power of the mind and spirit."

In 1975 Bruno visited India for the first time. In 1983 Ma Yoga Shakti of Bombay gave him sannyas. "For me Siva represents the Absolute Supreme. I feel that a form is important in encountering mind and energy. In our ashram we have pictures of many Indian Gods and Goddesses. People put all their love into and concentrate on these picture of these pictures. It is a mere form of respect, but it works very well as a mirror to go deep inside your personality."

On Sahaj Yoga, "natural union," he summarizes, "For purification visitors sing, meditate, jump and do anything which comes spontaneously to them. Sometimes people lose their consciousness because of too much energy which can effect breathing." He confides that kundalini-lifted levitation sometimes occurs.

I floated out of Bruno's ashram. In Milan I was hosted by Caterina - Conio, a true Gandhian. She says, "Gandhi was the first environmentalist and ecologist in this world." She works through an organization to establish links between Italians and Indian villagers. She also runs a spiritual center in Milan dedicated to the sageness of Swami Abhishiktananda, formerly Henry le Saux, who wrote several books on his journeys through mystic India. My journey revealed India's jnana surfacing in Italy.

Venetian DHARMA

La Cevales family in Venice is inspired by the Hindu family conventions where children reverently obey the parents. Madame Gisella is a charming, virtuous lady who brought up her two sons and one daughter in a most sublime way. She is a healer who learned the psychic skills of faith - healing in India. Her older son is a medical student determined to find a practical confluence of western medicine and the Hindu medical system of ayurveda. The other son is an architect whose designs make an attempt to bring human habitation closer to nature. The only daughter is a psychologist dedicating he youth to the care of elderly people and the terminally

ill.

The family is grateful to the teachings of their spiritual master in India. A guest is like God in this household. The togetherness of the family at the vegetarian dinner table radiates warmth and hospitality which some of the major Indian cities are losing now.

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